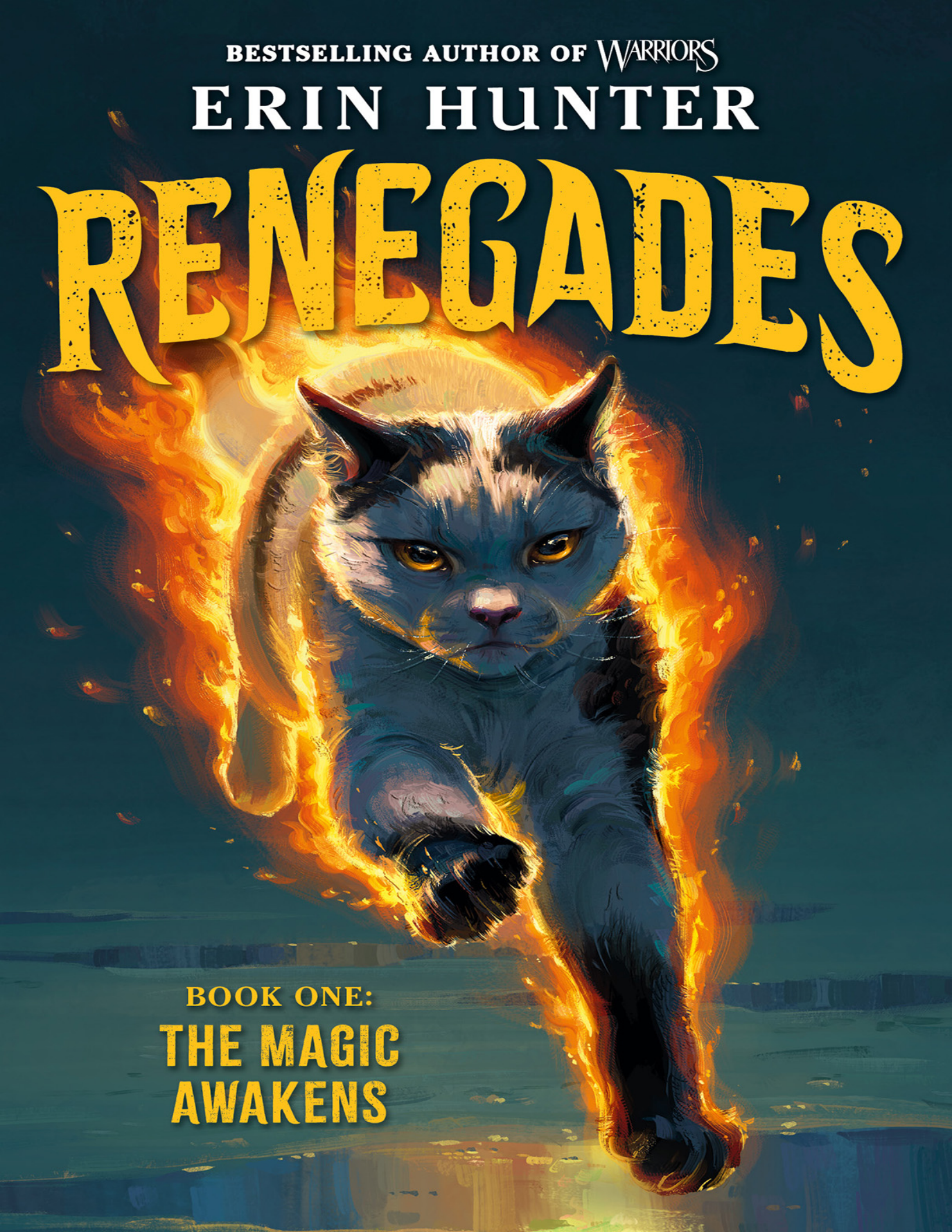
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF WARRIORS

ERIN HUNTER

RENEGADES



BOOK ONE:

THE MAGIC AWAKENS

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Dedication

For Charlie and Jess

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Prologue

The anima was her guide.

It swirled above the water, invisible, but Endurance's glands were alive to it, as sure as any predator to the scent of blood. The hidden tides of magic made her senses sing with an ancient song. It didn't matter that her sight was fading with age. It didn't matter that no moonlight penetrated the cloud to light her way. She could have made this journey with her eyes closed.

The old toad hopped along the riverbank, drizzle tickling her back, toes splaying for purchase in the mud. She picked her way past the detritus that clogged the water's flow—old tin cans and bits of metal, wrappers that still carried the scents of human food. Carried in on the wind or tossed from the road above, their trash became snagged in the shallows, where it lay rotting or rusting. In her younger days, the waterway had flowed clean and clear, its babble mingled only with the buzzing of fat insects. Or maybe her memory was playing tricks on her. There were no insects tonight.

Yet whatever changes the years had wrought, there was always the anima. It was said to come from mountains far away, where humans never ventured. There were places in the city where the anima could be harder to discern. But not here, by the river. Here it flowed rich and free.

She had almost reached her destination—the bridge that cut the city in two—and where, every full moon, the Conclave would gather. Unusually, her belly fluttered with anticipation. Her visions had been troubling her recently, and she hardly knew what to make of them.

She heard the traffic long before she saw it and, gazing upward, saw the bridge looming. Even at this hour, the cars streamed across, their lights

making silver sparkles of the rain. At either end rose the two halves of the city where the humans spawned and teemed. They rarely descended beneath the bridge itself—just the odd youngster marking the guardrails with strange swirls and symbols. *Even humans have their rituals*, old Grit had once remarked. But Endurance hadn't seen one down here for a long time, and their markings had faded, or grown over with slimy moss.

She was pleased to see most of the Conclave had already arrived. They sat, three squat toads still as rocks, where the bank had crumbled, forming a small island knotted with weeds. Somehow a rolling crate had found its way down here too and lay upturned in the shallows like the bones of a long-forgotten creature.

When the others saw Endurance, they lifted their warbling voices in greeting, and she splashed across the narrow channels to join them.

"You're late, old mother," grumbled Stoic. His skin was bright orange for the most part, though his underbelly was as white as snow.

"Show some respect to our leader," put in Fortitude, a small green toad. "She's eighteen summers born."

"And she can answer for herself," scolded Endurance, climbing onto the island. "But Stoic is right. I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I'm afraid my legs haven't so much spring of late."

Courage, the youngest of the Conclave, dark and long-limbed with a narrow head, crawled closer to her. He'd been admitted only five moons before, on the untimely death of poor Grit, crushed by the wheels of a car while still groggy from hibernation. Yet, despite his youth, Endurance already sensed Courage to be powerfully attuned, maybe more than any of them.

"I'm glad you came," he trilled quietly. "My visions . . . they've been . . ."

"Not yet," said Stoic. "We must abide by the customs. Resilience isn't here."

"Yes, he is!" came a voice from the shadows, followed by the splat and plop of a toad moving at speed over boggy ground. By the time he reached them, his knobbly flanks were heaving. "The humans have erected a new dwelling right on my usual route. I had to find another way around."

"Will they ever stop?" muttered Fortitude. "Soon there'll be no wilderness left!"

“It is true, the humans are encroaching. And the anima is not flowing as strongly. But as long as there is anima, there’ll always be places for our kind,” warbled Endurance. She waited for Resilience to catch his breath before addressing Courage. “So tell us, young one, of your vision.”

Courage cleared his throat. “I was in my usual place, on top of one of their skyscrapers,” he began quietly. “It was a stormy dawn. Wind drove the rain sideways, and the bellies of the clouds flashed with light. But for a moment a patch of sky cleared and showed me the shape of the future. I saw a tree of drooping branches, and beyond shone the pale and yellow moon. Its light, cast through the boughs, became a shadow claw raking the city below me. It seemed so real, I could imagine it tearing great gouges from the streets.”

Endurance swallowed thickly as his words sank in. Perhaps it was a coincidence that she had seen the same.

“A tree *in* the clouds?” croaked Stoic. “Are you sure?”

Endurance gave the ground a soft slap with her foot. “He says he saw it. Why would you doubt him?”

Stoic shuffled his bulk a little. “I meant no offense, old mother,” he rasped. “It’s just . . . well, I saw something similar.”

All heads turned to him, and Endurance felt her skin pucker.

“I was in the city park,” Stoic continued. “There’s a place the children and the dogs never venture, where the ground is marshy, the air dank. From there I can watch the fountain. No unattuned could know it, but in the falling spray, the anima gathers. There *I* saw the moon as well, but in my vision a tree was reaching upward, as if to wrestle it to earth.”

Endurance had a strange sense of the night pressing in on her from all sides. She wasn’t ready to share her own vision yet, but dread sat heavy in her gut at what she had heard so far.

“I saw it too!” warbled Fortitude. “In the bottom of my pond, among the black weeds, I saw a moon that burned like fire above a tree. As I watched, the leaves turned to ash and fell, leaving the blackened branches bare.”

“And you, Resilience?” asked Endurance.

The latecomer surveyed her with black and beady eyes. He swelled his throat, as if gathering his resolve. “The same,” he clucked. “A moon and a tree, in conflict. What does it mean?”

Endurance moistened her lips with a flicker of her tongue. “I have seen it too,” she said. “Almost nightly since our last gathering. In my visions, the

moon waxes and wanes, and with it the tree withers and blooms. When one thrives, the other suffers. It is as though the two are connected . . . as though they fight for the same breath to sustain them." She shivered as she recalled the eerie images. "I don't know what it portends, but we must not ignore it. Something important is coming. A mighty struggle."

A silence fell over the Conclave, so the only sound was the whoosh of the traffic above their heads.

"Come closer, all of you," said Endurance.

She shuffled to the river's edge, and the Conclave gathered at her side. The water was black as the night sky, offering no reflection. She sensed its anima, though, dense and rich and life-giving.

"Lend me your power," she beseeched them, "that together we may see more clearly."

She closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath, and heard her toad-kind do the same. As she inhaled, the anima filled her, warm as the riverbank on a summer's day. And though she couldn't see the Conclave alongside her, she felt their presence from the anima that enfolded her in thick currents. She felt it lift her, the toil of years seeming to vanish from her tired limbs.

Endurance dipped her head into the dark waters, where the anima blurred the boundaries between the world of past and present, where the spirits of her ancestors, and of Conclaves old, all convened as one.

And there, in her mind's eye, she saw the future.

Endurance ripped her head from the water, droplets scattering on the other members of the Conclave, and staggered backward from the river's edge. From her mouth a cry escaped.

"What is it?" asked Fortitude.

"What did you see?" croaked Resilience.

Slowly, the anima seeped from her veins, leaving her shivering. The vision was more powerful than any Endurance had experienced before. It left her reeling to the tips of her toes.

"Tell us, please!" trilled Stoic. "Was it bad?"

She turned to face them. Each toad was staring at her. *They want answers, but what can I tell them?*

"I . . . I don't know what it means," she warbled.

"But you saw *something*?" said Courage.

Of that there could be no doubt. Not only had she seen it—she had felt it with every fiber of her being.

Heat, across her skin.
Smoke in her nostrils.
A crackle in her ears.
An orange wave sweeping toward her.
“Yes,” she mumbled. “I saw fire. Terrible, terrible fire.”

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Chapter 1

Something was after her.

Luna zigzagged back and forth, running as fast as she could, her paws pounding against the ground, but it was no use. Whatever was behind her—she was too afraid to turn and see—was gaining on her. She could smell its foul breath, feel the heat of its body coming closer and closer. *I can't let it catch me*, she thought helplessly. *I have to get away.*

"Wake up, Lu!"

She shifted, still half-asleep as she came out of her dream. Willow's voice was insistent, but not enough to make Luna open her eyes. Her sister was always fussing about something or other. Always worrying. It was *exhausting*. "What is it?" she murmured.

"Fire!" yowled Willow.

This time the voice came with a sharp paw prod, right between the ribs, and as the meaning sank in, Luna twitched her nose. An acrid scent slid up her nostrils, bringing with it a stab of alarm. Suddenly she was awake, uncurled, on four paws. Willow was sitting up beside their sleeping spot on the worn leather of the dining booth seats. In the dark of the restaurant, Luna's sister was a black silhouette, her tail swishing anxiously back and forth, blue eyes agleam with a dancing orange reflection.

Luna hopped up with her forepaws on the seat back and saw it too. Through the frosted glass of the kitchen doors, blurred and leaping flames. Fingers of gray smoke were creeping under the doors. Already a heavy haze hung in the air, and her eyes began to sting.

"We need to go—now," mewed Luna, trying to remain calm.

"We can't!" said Willow, squirming. "This is our home. . . ."

“This home is on fire!” replied Luna. “We’ll find another.”

She nudged her head into Willow’s neck to encourage her to move, then leaped from the booth to the tiled floor. After a brief pause, flashing panicked looks at the flames, Willow followed. Luna ran for the main entrance, only to halt when she saw smoke engulfing the stairway, carrying with it a wave of baking heat.

“We can’t go that way,” she mewed.

Willow pressed close to her, eyes wide with terror, as a low rumble came from above. They both looked up. The blackened ceiling panels were *moving*—buckling and shifting like the belly of a great beast.

“Go!” yowled Luna, shoving her sister hard as she sprang the opposite way. In the same moment, the ceiling collapsed in a shower of debris and sparks, right where they’d been standing. A cloud of soot washed over her, leaving Luna spluttering. Somehow the fire was coming from above *and* below.

The smog grew thicker. She couldn’t see her sister, and a spike of terror weakened her legs.

“Willow!” she wailed.

There was no answer.

“Willow! Where are you?”

“Luna?” came a plaintive meow. And then, through shifting smoke, Luna saw her.

“Are you okay?”

Willow shook her fur, throwing off flakes of ash. “There’s no way out. It’s everywhere!”

Luna cast panicked glances through the roiling smoke. Willow was right. It seemed to be closing in from all sides, licking hungrily from booth to booth.

“Up there,” meowed Luna, pointing her nose toward the shelves behind the diner’s food counter, where there was a small window. It had always been ajar, and she thought it might just be wide enough that they could wriggle through. She had no idea what lay on the other side.

The sisters picked their way across the glowing, smoking remains of the ceiling tiles, hopped onto the counter, then onto an old glass-fronted cabinet. It was hard to see much at all in the swirling fumes, and with each shallow breath, Luna’s head swam with a nausea that threatened to make

her stumble and fall. If she did, she knew it would be over. But they had reached the window, where the smoke billowed out into the night.

A light drizzle fell outside, and beyond the ledge lay the sweet promise of fresh air, but Luna's heart sank to see the drop. The street was two floors down, a narrow alley running between the restaurant and the next building over. The walls were sheer, with no way to climb down. Only a dumpster, just off to one side, offered anything to aim for. But it would take a fair leap to reach it.

"We have to jump," mewed Luna.

Willow stared down. "It's too far."

Luna felt waves of heat lapping at her tail. She looked back and saw the restaurant was completely ablaze. "We've got no choice."

Her sister was still staring at the ground below, her gray flanks quivering. Luna felt her sister's fear almost more keenly than her own.

"We can make it," she growled, as much to convince herself as Willow. Could they? She didn't know, but it was the only chance they had. They *might* survive the fall, but there was no way they could survive the fire. She squeezed through the gap in the window. "I'll go first."

"I'm scared," meowed Willow behind her.

"Me too," replied Luna, "but we have to. Together, okay?"

Willow bobbed her head. "Always," she purred.

Luna took a deep breath and bunched the muscles of her hindquarters. "Now!" she hissed.

She sprang from the window, paws outstretched. She seemed airborne for an eternity, then picked up speed, the ground rushing to meet her. With a thump, her four feet slammed into the lid of the dumpster. Her legs cushioned the impact. Willow landed a heartbeat later, skittering on her paws but keeping her balance.

"We did it!" trilled Willow.

Relief flooded Luna from whiskers to tail, and she sucked deep breaths into her burning lungs. In the dark of the alley, the only light came from the windows of the diner above, each an angry red glow.

"It's all gone," she mewed quietly.

Willow looked up too, then nuzzled her sister's scruff. "We'll be okay . . . ," she purred, unconvincingly.

As the terror and triumph of the jump left her veins, Luna's despair threatened to overwhelm her. The old diner was the only home they'd ever

known. Well, almost. Since they'd first run away after their mother's death when they were tiny kittens, it had been their sanctuary in the city, a roof over their heads with enough rodents to keep them fed and free from human interference.

"We'll be okay," Willow repeated.

The rain turned into a deluge, cooling their hot fur. Luna turned toward the end of the alley, where the lights of the city awaited, smeared by the downpour. Suddenly their life of the last few moons, sheltered and safe, seemed so small. She should have known it couldn't last forever. She felt foolish for not preparing herself better for when it would inevitably end. They'd been incredibly lucky once—but life would be very different from here on out.

Now, there'd be no more pretending the world outside didn't exist. Now, they'd have to *survive* in it.

All night they huddled together under a car, listening to the hammering of the torrential rain. Luna, shivering uncontrollably, thought sleep would never come, but it must have, because when she next opened her eyes, a gray dawn had arrived, and Willow was licking her ear.

"You're filthy, sister," she mewed.

Luna purred her thanks and let her sister groom her. It reminded her of her mother's touch, and she lost herself for a moment in the memory. But the contentment couldn't last. The smell of smoke was still thick in Luna's nostrils, and her limbs had stiffened from being curled so tightly against the cold. She stretched, then inched her whiskers into the morning. The street was deserted but lined with cars, the concrete crowded with puddles.

"We'll find somewhere else," mewled Willow wistfully. "Another human eating place with mice and rats and leftovers. Maybe better than the last one! Maybe with carpets on the floor!"

Luna nuzzled her sister and guessed that she too was remembering the home they'd had before the diner, back with their mother and the human man who had put down bowls of delicious food that barely needed chewing. Every surface had seemed soft and warm, so that when play ended, all one had to do was lie down and sleep. It seemed like a distant dream of lazy days, full bellies, and their mother's warmth.

It was possible, for a while at least, to lose herself in the memories, but it never lasted. For in the wake of nostalgia came the other stuff. The nightmare of how it all ended, when the human who'd seemed so kind showed who he *really* was.

She shook herself. Soot fell around her like a shadow.

"We shouldn't rush into anything," she mewed, still thinking of the past. "A place isn't always as good as it seems."

From the sadness in Willow's bright blue eyes, she obviously caught her meaning.

Luna pricked her ears to brighten her mood. "Anyway, this might be a blessing. We don't know what other opportunities there might be. For adventure. For . . . fun."

"Well," Willow mewed, her voice full of false cheer, "as long as we're not spending another night in the rain!"

The car they were hiding under gave a strange yelp, lights flashing on the wet ground at each corner. They both froze.

Footsteps approached—a human heading from a building across the road, right toward the spot where they sheltered. Had they been spotted? Luna got ready to run.

But the human stopped, opened the door, and climbed inside. A moment later, the car growled to life above them and seemed to shake Luna to her bones. Luna pressed her body to her sister's and they both cowered as the car shot off along the street, leaving them exposed. It belched clouds of smoke and sprayed water from its wheels as it went.

"Was that *fun* enough for you?" asked Willow as they darted onto the wet sidewalk.

Luna shuddered. They knew next to nothing about what dangers the city held. If they were going to explore, they needed a safe place to return to each night—somewhere away from the eyes of any humans.

Her stomach rumbled, and Willow's immediately echoed the noise.

"Sounds like we're thinking the same thing," mewed Luna.

"Breakfast!" replied her sister.

They stuck to the quietest streets as best they could, hugging the walls of the tall buildings. The city was waking up around them, with cars choking the streets, and humans going about their business amid flashing lights and

raucous sounds. Luna tried to keep her bearings for a while, memorizing the turns they took from the diner. But eventually she gave up.

There's no going back now.

The smells of the city were overwhelming. Food aroma spilling from storefronts, the belching fumes of the vehicles—they saw one that was enormous, almost blocking the sky, and chock-full of humans. Among their smells were scents of other animals, of whom her instincts told her to be wary. Yet with each step farther into the unknown, her confidence grew. There were dangers, yes, but a city this big was full of opportunity. With her sister at her side, they could find a way.

She wasn't surprised that Willow seemed cautious about exploring the new world. Her sister had always been more careful. She hesitated for longer at street corners. Her wide eyes darted at the slightest strange sound, and she crept along the sidewalks with her head lowered and tail tucked. Luna slowed her own steps so as not to get too far ahead and offered reassuring purrs. *She just needs time to adjust, that's all.* But as they reached an area of open grass and trees, Willow's ears pricked up, and her nostrils twitched.

"You smell that?" she chirped.

"Pigeon," purred Luna, her mouth watering.

They hadn't had pigeon since their mother caught one in the garden of the human's house, feeding them juicy scraps when they were just weaned. She must have been a remarkable hunter, Luna realized, for she had delivered all kinds of treats from her expeditions in those early days.

There were metal railings around the parkland, but they easily slid through and crept into the undergrowth on the other side. From the bushes, Luna saw them—a dense flock of birds, bobbing around an overflowing trash can. Others fluttered and flapped above, trying to find a landing spot to share the feast.

"You send them to me," murmured Willow.

Luna signaled her agreement with a flick of her tail and watched as Willow slunk away to her left, her body low. The pigeons were too busy with their feeding frenzy to see Willow skirt a wide arc around them, but even if they'd been on high alert, Luna doubted they'd have spotted her. Willow moved in smooth bursts, at each pause seeming to melt into her surroundings. At times Luna had to squint to spot her sister's gray shape

among the foliage, and even then, there were moments she could not see her.

Stalking wasn't something their mother had taught her—it came to Willow as naturally as breathing. And though the sisters were practiced at their roles by now, Luna always felt a twinge of envy at her sister's skill.

Before long, she caught a flash of Willow's blue eyes, lurking in a flowerbed a few strides beyond where the pigeons fed. The rest of her form materialized, muscles bunched and ready. It was time for Luna to play her part.

Her heartbeat picked up to a rapid patter as she crept forward, low to the ground, gathering herself for the assault. Heat built inside her like it did at every hunt, fizzing along every strand of fur. It made her feel powerful and alive and almost invincible. It sharpened her claws, so she felt she could slice through anything. Her eyes settled on one particular fat bird, right in the midst of the flock.

She ran, darting across the grass, then the asphalt, straight for it. Time seemed to slow. One by one, the birds' heads jerked in her direction. Eyes widened and wings spread, but she already knew her momentum would be too much for them to escape. The flock began to rise from the ground, a simultaneous lift of feathers. Their wings and cries tangled in panic.

Luna reached her target, pushing off from her hind legs, front claws extended. She buried them in the pigeon's flank, landing on top of her prey. It took a single bite to dispatch the flapping, panicking bird. She spat out downy plumage and stood over the corpse gripped in her claws.

The rest of the flock tried to fly, but Willow was waiting for them. With a languid ease, she leaped, her body twisting and seeming to hang in the air. She snatched one, then a second, carrying each back to earth before finishing them with her needle-sharp teeth.

Luna's blood still pumped hot with the kill.

For a moment at least, things were good. The terror of the night before and the uncertainty of their predicament—all was forgotten in the triumph of the hunt.

"What a team!" mewed Willow as they dug into the delicious kill under the shelter of the bushes where they'd dragged their prizes.

"You were amazing," purred Luna. "They didn't know what hit them!"

Her sister paused for a moment in her feast, glancing up from the partially picked bones. “You know, it felt . . . odd. But in a good way.”

Luna swallowed a mouthful of flesh. “I was thinking the same.”

They’d hunted together countless times, of course, cornering the mice who dared to venture from the restaurant walls. But something about the park, and the pigeons, had been entirely different. Maybe it was because they were outside, in the fresh air.

No, thought Luna, *that’s not it. . . .*

“I feel, I don’t know . . . more alive,” Willow mewed.

Yes, thought Luna. *Vitality.* As if they’d been living under a dark sky, and suddenly the sun had come out.

The fur on her neck lifted, alerting her to danger, and she jerked her head around, back arching. A pair of eyes gleamed a few strides away, low in the undergrowth. From the set of the stare, Luna knew at once what it was.

“Rat,” she hissed.

“Leave it,” warned Willow. “We’ve got enough.”

The eyes flashed as the creature darted away. Luna’s legs responded, sprinting in pursuit.

“Lu, wait!”

She knew her sister would follow and heard the scamper of paws at her back. Rats could be vicious things when they put up a fight, but with two of them it wouldn’t stand a chance. They left the bushes, onto open grass. Luna heard an old human scream, but her eyes were on her prey, which jinked to and fro across the ground. She matched its zigzags, gaining a little with each attempted dodge. Then the rat seemed to change tactics and headed right for a copse of trees.

Big mistake, thought Luna, her mouth watering.

In a straight line, there was no way it could escape. She plunged into the trees after it.

Her eyes adjusting to the gloom, she saw it cutting a path over ground soft with fallen pine needles. It was flagging, though. It skidded suddenly to a halt, turning to face her, eyes ablaze. So it *was* a fighter. She felt her claws protract in anticipation and leaped.

“Stop!” hissed the rat.

The word hit Luna like a physical blow. A rat that *spoke*?

Something was suddenly wrong, her limbs gripped by a weird sensation. She was trapped in midair, suspended with nothing beneath her paws.

Panicking, she tried to move, but all she could do was writhe above the ground.

The rat watched her defiantly as she flailed her legs and tail.

“You’ll come no closer!” it snarled.

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Chapter 2

Luna?

Willow's heart lurched as she heard her sister's strange yowl. Panic gave her a burst of speed and she flung herself headlong into the trees, only to skid to a halt.

What she saw made no sense.

Luna was fixed, somehow, in midair, her legs writhing as if trying to find the ground again. For a moment, Willow was terrified that her sister had become impaled on a jutting branch, but peering closer, that wasn't it. She really was . . . *floating.*

Willow turned her attention to the rat, which was approaching Luna.

"Thought I was breakfast, did you?"

The words only made Willow's head spin further. Rats didn't speak any more than cats floated. Yet both things were happening right in front of her. The rat's eyes blazed with anger as it moved closer to Luna, teeth bared. It apparently hadn't seen Willow in the shadows.

She pounced. The rat saw her at last, but it was too late. Willow landed on top of it, claws ready, and sent it rolling through the leaf litter. Before it could gather itself, she pinned the rodent with a single paw, avoiding its gnashing teeth as it squirmed and snapped. In the same moment, Luna dropped from the air and thumped to earth in a heap of black-and-white fur.

"What happened?" gasped Willow.

Luna was trembling. "I . . . I don't know."

"Truthtellers! I should have known! Let me go!" snarled the rat.

Willow adjusted her weight, and it gave a squeal.

"Do you want to do the honors?" she asked her sister.

But Luna was staring at something past her.

A new ripple of fear tickled Willow's spine, as the hot stink of predator made her nose twitch. A sandy-colored dog with wiry fur paced into the clearing, its head lowered and ears pulled back.

"Leave him be!" it barked, revealing yellow teeth beneath its wrinkled muzzle.

Willow took an involuntary step in retreat, releasing the rat, which scampered toward the dog. She weighed up her options. Fight or flee?

Her sister's back was already arched as she stood her ground and hissed. Willow knew her well enough to be sure she was about to attack. And that would almost certainly be a mistake—this dog didn't look like a pushover.

"Don't!" she warned.

But Luna's eyes suddenly flared as bright as car headlights. With the flash came a wave of heat that sent Willow scampering backward in terror. The rat scurried away between the dog's legs, but the dog itself rippled and vanished. Willow jerked her head to see which way it had run.

Right behind where it had stood, a bush caught flame, its leaves curling to dark crisps. As quick as it had ignited, the fire died, leaving the branches smoldering and gray. Willow's heart was pounding out of her chest as she blinked in confusion, trying to make sense of it. She could smell her own singed whiskers.

"Luna?" she whimpered.

The dog somehow rematerialized a few strides from where it had stood. Willow's mind told her it wasn't possible for something to move that fast—and she hadn't seen it *move* at all, but rather blink in and out of existence. Now it stood protectively over the rat. Under its patchy fur, Willow could see the outline of its ribs as it panted. She shook her head, struggling to understand what she'd seen.

Willow crept closer to her sister. There was still warmth hanging in the air around Luna, as if emanating from her actual fur. "Are you okay?" mewed Willow. She was aware of the dog and rat watching, but she could see from Luna's tucked tail that her sister was in shock.

Luna was staring at the smoking bush. "I . . . I didn't mean to . . . ," she murmured.

"Well, please don't do it again, or we'll have to get nasty," said the rat. "You Truthtellers know whose territory this is."

“I don’t know what happened,” mewled Luna. She dropped into a crouch, ears flattened, in a way Willow had never seen before.

Willow positioned herself protectively between the other animals and her sister. It seemed the dog and rat were companions.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“We ask the questions here,” growled the dog. “This is Wild Alliance territory, as you know.”

“I . . . we don’t know that that means,” Luna meowed.

The rat cocked its head. “You know, Thorn, I don’t think they’re Truthtellers after all.”

“Why not?” said the dog. “Could be spies. New recruits. You’re too trusting, Skitter.”

“We aren’t spies,” hissed Willow. “Or Truthtellers, whatever that means.”

“Never seen fire magic that powerful before,” squeaked the rat, twitching its nose. “Not in one so young.”

“Magic?” mewed Willow, nuzzling her sister but keeping her eyes on the other animals. “Are you serious?”

The dog sat back on its haunches. “What else do you call setting a bush on fire?”

Willow felt Luna relaxing a little beside her, the tension leaving her body.

“I’ve never done that before,” her sister meowed. “I can’t do . . . magic.”

“She doesn’t even know she’s attuned,” giggled the rat.

Truthtellers . . . *Wild Alliance* . . . *Attuned* . . . They were speaking another language, and Willow felt stupid, helpless, and not a little annoyed.

“Look, we didn’t mean to come into your ‘territory’ or whatever,” she said. “We’ll be on our way.” She made to turn, but her sister remained with her eyes fixed on the dog and rat.

“How come we can understand you?” she asked.

“Like Skitter said,” replied the dog, “you’re attuned. All magical creatures can communicate with one another.”

“Even rats?” asked Luna, her voice laced with disbelief.

Skitter the rat twitched his long whiskers. “Charming.”

“Even rats,” replied Thorn the dog with a snort. He gave his fur a shake and a few stray hairs fluttered to the ground. “It sounds like you two have a lot to learn.”

The tension had vanished, along with the smoke from the singed bush. Willow at last dared to take her gaze from the strangers and gave her

sister's forehead a lick. None of this made any sense, and yet Willow couldn't deny it was happening.

"It's been a strange day for us," she said.

Thorn dipped his head and muttered something to Skitter, who paused for a moment, then bobbed his snout.

"Look," he said. "You'd better come with us. We attuned need to stick together. The rest of the Wild Alliance will agree."

Willow felt a pang of unease in her gut. The rat seemed to be talking just to Luna. Her sister's magic—if that's what the fire had been—was impressive. No wonder they were interested. But it was frightening too.

"You'll need to choose a coven at some point," added Thorn, "and we're the best of the bunch."

From Luna's shining eyes, Willow could see it would be hard to persuade her to walk away from the invitation. But that didn't mean they should just go along with two creatures they barely knew—one a hungry-looking dog—to meet whatever the Wild Alliance might be.

"Talk it over between yourselves," said Skitter. "Let's give them space, Thorn."

Weirdly, the rat seemed to be in charge. The two animals backed away a little.

"I'm not sure about this," Willow said in a low mew by her sister's ear.

Luna nuzzled her head into Willow's, and Willow knew what she was going to say before the words left her mouth. "I think we should go with them," Luna whispered.

"We don't know who these creatures are," Willow whispered back. "They *say* they mean us no harm, but would you trust a rat?" She eyed the dog nervously. "What if it's a trick? That dog could have a whole pack waiting!"

"The dog could have attacked us already," meowed Luna. "I know you're scared, but—"

"It's not that . . . ," Willow replied. She was beginning to wish they'd never entered the park in the first place.

"What is it then?" pressed her sister. Before Willow could think of what to say, Luna continued. "We can't just ignore this. That rat can talk! He said I've got magic powers. . . ."

The excitement was evident in her sister's voice, and Willow couldn't blame her. They'd both had a shock. But that was all the more reason to

tread with caution and not to make rash decisions.

We don't need new companions. We need to find another safe nest, establish hunting grounds, and take stock.

"I don't know," Willow said. "We can survive without help—the way we hunted those pigeons proved that. And it might be hard for a few days, but we'll find somewhere new to make a home."

Luna stared hard at her sister, her pupils sharp against the gold of her irises. "Do you remember what it was like before we found the diner?"

"Yes," murmured Willow quietly. "It was horrible."

Though *horrible* hardly did it justice. Cold nights huddled against each other, battered by storms of grief. Gnawing hunger. Almost constant fear.

"And when we saw that door, open just a crack—how you didn't want to go inside?"

Willow remembered, but only dimly. She'd been terrified of everything back then, almost paralyzed by it.

"But if we hadn't," continued Luna, "we'd never have found the diner at all."

Willow could see what her sister was getting at, but it felt different this time. There were dogs and talking rats and magic. Surely Luna could see that.

"There's something going on we don't understand," Luna hissed. "*I* set that bush on fire. I've no idea how, but I did. What if . . . ?" But it seemed she couldn't finish the thought.

"What if what?" Willow pressed.

"Nothing," said Luna. "I just . . . I think we need them."

Willow opened her mouth to protest but couldn't find the words.

"I can look after us," she mewed weakly.

"I don't need looking after," Luna replied. "I need to *understand*." For a moment there was silence between them, broken when Luna spoke again. "I say we go with them now. And if it doesn't work out, it will be a fun little adventure and there's nothing to stop us from moving on."

Willow knew she'd lost the argument, as she so often did. Her sister's mind was made up, and if Willow kept objecting, Luna would only dig her paws in deeper. "Okay, Lu," she purred. "As long as we're together."

"Always," mewled Luna. She gave her sister a playful nudge with her forehead, and Willow felt a niggle of frustration. *She knew she'd get her*

way. Then they both turned to face Thorn and Skitter. “We’ll come with you.”

Thorn’s tail wagged slowly. “A wise decision! This way.” He turned to go, before looking back over his shoulder. “But no more fires, please. That was a little too close for comfort.”

“I’ll try my best,” said Luna, her voice light as she followed without even a backward glance at her sister.

Willow swallowed her pride, but not her anxieties, and went after her.

I hope this isn’t a mistake.

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Chapter 3

I can't believe we're doing this, thought Luna as she matched her speed to that of their new guides. Yet despite her misgivings, she knew she wouldn't change her decision. She *needed* to understand.

The rat and the dog followed a course into a wilder part of the park where the grass grew long and there were no human scents among the trees. Luna could tell from her sister's silence and the way she lagged a few paces that Willow wasn't happy. She knew that she had really given Willow no choice. But Willow was too cautious in almost everything she did. She didn't seem to accept that no reward came without *some* risk.

And I meant what I said. If these creatures are lying, or anything feels wrong, we'll go. Just us two again.

She could still smell the smoke in her nostrils, and with it the traces of the feeling that had accompanied the fire. Terror, yes, but something else as well. Potential. *Power.* She hadn't consciously summoned it to her. Rather it had come of its own accord—filling every fiber of her fur to such a degree it couldn't be contained.

Yet, it hadn't felt *entirely* alien. More like a part of her that had always been there, a hidden claw that extended without her even thinking. If the dog hadn't moved—and how *had* it moved like that, flashing in and out of existence?—she dreaded to think what might have happened.

Attuned was the word they'd used. And that other word: *magical*. It sent a thrill through Luna's pelt. And to think, she'd seen the rat as nothing more than a quick meal. . . .

"Hey, I'm sorry," she said, quickening her pace to catch up with Skitter. "You know, for trying to eat you."

Skitter twitched his nose. “Don’t worry about it. I’m not easy pickings anyway. If you remember, I had the upper hand before your sister came to the rescue.”

Luna recalled the strange sensation of being suspended, helpless above the ground, and shivered.

Skitter chuckled. “You have so much to learn.”

There was no mockery in his voice—more a sort of fondness that was hard to fathom coming from a creature she had considered prey.

“I’ve never met a rat I could understand before,” she meowed.

“Not surprising, really,” Skitter replied. “Most are mundane.”

“Huh?”

“Unattuned,” said Skitter. “With no more magic than a lump of rock.”

Luna digested this, her mind turning over this information, and the other new terms she had heard Skitter and Thorn use. “And these Truthtellers—you don’t like them?” She remembered the venom in his voice when he’d accused her and Willow of being two of them.

The rat paused. “I can take or leave them. Goes for any coven, really. As long as they stay in their territory. Only rule is, attuned don’t hunt attuned.”

“But mundane animals are fair game?’ Luna asked.

“She’s learning,” said Thorn.

Luna wasn’t sure he liked her.

Maybe that’s because I nearly set him on fire.

“How much farther are we going?” mewed Willow from behind them.

Luna glanced back and saw with a flash of annoyance that her sister was dragging her paws.

“Almost there,” said Thorn.

Luna slowed a little and caught her sister’s eye with an expression she hoped looked encouraging.

She could at least try to be friendly. . . .

Thorn and Skitter also stopped to let Willow catch up. Luna’s sister sped up a little, but as she reached their side, she threw a glance back the way they’d come.

“It’s not far now,” said Skitter. “Honestly, you’re going to love meeting the rest of the coven.”

Luna could tell he was making an effort.

“So how do you *know* if you’re attuned?” her sister asked.

Skitter’s tail lashed. “Only attuned can understand each other.”

“Yes, but what about . . . magic? Like Luna’s fire. Does it just happen?”

Skitter’s tail coiled underneath his belly. “It depends.”

Luna saw her sister’s brow knot and felt her own do the same.

Thorn let out a sigh. “Skitter, we’ve got time for a detour, right?”

“Don’t see why not,” squeaked the rat. “Mousebane’s probably having one of his afternoon naps, anyway.”

Luna wondered who Mousebane was, but before she could ask, Thorn had set off again, changing direction to head up a grassy slope toward higher ground. At the top of the rise was an old park bench, and beyond it a view of the city below. It was enough to make Luna slow her steps and gasp—the sprawl seemed endless, disappearing into a haze in the distance. But looking toward where the sun rose, she saw a vast river spanned by a wide bridge. On the other side, a jutting forest of immense buildings crowded together—gray without a single speck of green. Luna had always thought that she lived in the city, but now she could see that her home was only on the fringe of this larger, more crowded *true* city. It filled her with a deep sense of unease to think of so many humans packed together. Could animals possibly live there too?

Thorn had continued toward the bench, and she hurried to keep up.

“The raw material of magic is called anima,” Thorn was saying. “It ebbs and flows throughout the city. It’s invisible to the naked eye. It has no scent or sound. But those who are attuned can channel its power.”

“Is that what Luna did?” asked Willow.

They’d reached the bench. Its wooden slats were rotted in parts, the metal frame colored with patches of rust. Beside it was a trash can. An old, crushed tin can lay on the ground beside it, and Skitter gave it a desultory sniff.

“She must have,” said Thorn. “There isn’t as much anima in the city as there once was. Normally, to use it, it takes training. To do magic, you sort of sense the anima, breathe it in, then unleash it . . . with intent.”

He sucked in a deep breath, closing his eyes.

Then slowly, something happened. His shape seemed to blur, his wiry fur losing its definition, like it was dissolving into the air. In less than two heartbeats, he was gone. Vanished.

“Woah!” said Luna. Willow’s hackles had risen, her blue eyes darting in alarm.

Thorn reappeared, now lying across the bench like he was basking in the sun. The trick was the same he'd pulled earlier in the gloom of the undergrowth. Here, in broad daylight, it was even weirder to behold.

"Easy when you get the hang of it," he said.

"Show-off," muttered Skitter. At the same time, his whiskers stiffened, and he looked at the crumpled can beside the trash can. His body twitched, and the can began to rise. Luna watched open-mouthed as it wobbled a little in midair, then shot vertically upward in a tall arc before falling to land in the trash can with a rattle.

"That's amazing!" said Luna, grateful he'd only chosen to lift her a tail-length above the ground.

"Most of the park is rich in anima. Well, relatively," said Thorn. He fixed his gaze on Luna. "You try."

"Now?"

Thorn made a show of looking around. "There's no one watching. Let's see what you're capable of."

Luna shared a glance with her sister. Willow's expression gave nothing away—she wore the same look she'd had since reluctantly agreeing to follow the dog and the rat—worried yet resigned. Luna sprang up onto the bench beside Thorn.

"So, what do I do?"

"Close your eyes," he said.

Luna did, shutting out the daylight.

"Okay, now try to feel the anima. Let it surround you. Let it fill you up."

Luna surprised herself. She could already sense . . . something. At first, it was like a light breeze tickling her fur, but as she focused, she felt the air gathering in soft, sweeping currents. It was gentle, but powerful, as if it had the potential to lift all four paws off the bench and make her weightless.

"I feel it . . . ," she whispered.

"Take it," muttered Thorn. "Take it in."

Luna took a deep breath. It seemed to her that the city breathed in at the same time. The currents steadied, drawn inward, filling her up. Her chest, her limbs, her mind—all suffused with the same warmth. It felt good, but it felt *dangerous* too, as if taking in too much might overwhelm her. It built like a ball of heat in her core.

"Now *use* it!" growled Thorn.

Luna's eyes snapped open as she released the energy. A burst of flame shot across the sky from a spot just in front of her eyes, scorching the air above their heads. Even Thorn cringed back, and Luna saw the orange reflection in her sister's wide stare. Luna blew out a breath, marveling at her own feat.

I did that!

"Oh my!" screeched Skitter.

The fire burned for just a moment then faded, leaving an acrid smell hanging in the air.

"Well *done*!" howled Thorn, leaping off the bench. "I can't wait for you to meet the others."

He seemed puppyish in his excitement, turning on the spot. Luna, though, felt suddenly drained, breathing hard.

"Are you all right?" asked Willow quietly.

Luna rubbed her ear with a paw. "I think so. Just tired."

"It can take a lot out of you," said Skitter. "Don't worry—with practice it'll get easier."

"That was . . . amazing," said Willow, but her voice was flat, and Luna knew exactly why. With every proof of her magic, it was one more step away from the certainties and comforts of their old life.

"You should try," purred Luna.

"I . . . I don't know," said Willow. "I don't think I have any powers."

Luna looked to the others. "You said we're both attuned, didn't you?"

"Undoubtedly," said Thorn. "Most attuned animals have one power that comes naturally. With time, others can be developed."

"Go on, give it a try," said Luna. She could see that her sister felt left out, but Luna was sure once she sensed the anima, her own magic would spring to life. Then she would share Luna's excitement.

"All right," said Willow. She hopped up onto the bench too, and closed her eyes as Thorn and Luna had done before.

"Just take your time," said Luna. "Feel the anima."

Her sister swallowed, and her nostrils flared. Her haunches tightened slightly under her fur.

It must be working, thought Luna. She wondered what would happen. Fire would make sense given they were sisters. Even just a flicker of flame would impress their new companions.

Seconds passed, with Willow's face contorted as she focused. But nothing happened.

Come on, Luna implored silently. *You can do it. . . .*

Eventually, with a sigh, Willow opened her eyes.

"I tried," she mewed meekly. She was clearly disappointed and even a little embarrassed.

"It's a lot of pressure," said Luna sympathetically. "Give it time."

"I didn't feel *anything*," said Willow.

"Maybe . . . Maybe I used up all the anima?" Luna purred gently, nuzzling her sister's neck.

She wished she hadn't said it. The quick look between Skitter and Thorn, which Willow couldn't have missed, spoke volumes.

"Come on, let's meet the others," said the rat.

They descended back into the overgrown parkland, through an undulating landscape where trees lay uprooted or grew in strange, twisted shapes. It felt ancient, and as the city vistas disappeared behind them, it was like stepping into another world entirely, one in which humans didn't exist. There were patches of boggier ground, and if Luna really focused, she thought she could sense anima here and there. They weren't following any path that she could see, and Thorn paused every so often, sniffing the air and casting cautious glances left and right. Luna wondered what he was scared of. These other *covens*, maybe.

Willow didn't say much and kept pace several strides to the rear, seemingly deep in thought. Luna sidled up to Skitter and kept her voice low.

"Is it normal not to be able to do it on your first try?"

Skitter kept his own squeak to a whisper. "From what I've seen, most attuned are capable of *something*, even if it's not all that impressive. Mind you, some don't bother with magic much at all. And I've heard of some forgetting how. Your sister didn't know about any of this until a short while ago. Give her time."

Luna had only just met the rat, but the way he avoided her gaze told her that he didn't fully believe what he was saying. She glanced at her sister, who met her eyes but quickly looked away again.

And she's thinking exactly the same thing. . . .

They’d cut through a thick patch of brambles and the ground felt softer beneath Luna’s paws, with patches of fluffy grass. Thorn paused at the edge of a babbling stream. It was shallow, with stepping stones slick with bright green weeds. On the far side the vegetation was thick and forbidding.

“Ah, home sweet home,” said Skitter.

“Er . . . there’s nothing here,” said Willow nervously.

Thorn’s tongue lolled. “Exactly what we want mundanes and humans to think.”

Leaping from the bank, he landed nimbly on one of the stepping stones, balancing for a moment in the middle of the stream. Instead of leaping to the far side, he jumped sideways in three odd skips, landing on what seemed like random rocks of various sizes. As his paws hit the fourth rock, the air on the far bank shimmered. The trees disappeared, and the wall of greenery became open sky.

In its place was a structure made of wood. Luna had seen human children laughing and leaping on something similar. She didn’t quite understand it herself—it seemed to be an impossible tangle of platforms, bars, and metal chutes. This one was abandoned, by the looks of it. Trees grew close to its perimeter on all sides, dense and gloomy, but protective also. Finally, she understood. Between the trees and the magic, they kept this place hidden from prying eyes.

“Welcome to the coven of the Wild Alliance!” said Thorn. He gave a yelp of excitement as he jumped to the bank. Skitter crossed too, his little claws scrabbling and dislodging loose soil as he climbed up the other side.

Luna hesitated for just a moment. Though the stream was narrow, this felt like the biggest step in their journey so far. She checked on her sister, who looked even more uncertain.

“We’ll be okay,” she purred. “Just stay by my side.”

Willow bobbed her head and actually went first, tiptoeing across to avoid getting her paws wet.

Luna crossed in two graceful bounds. She could already see movement among the play equipment. Furry bodies appeared from hiding places. She was surprised to see another cat—a tabby tom, his body low to the ground, eyeing them severely. Three more rats scurried between his paws.

Two small and skinny she-cats sidled from between the barred equipment. One was white with black feet, the other almost the exact reverse—dark as midnight and paws that looked caked in snow.

“What have we got here?” growled a deep voice from above.

Luna looked up, and her pelt bristled. At the top of the slide, standing proud, stood a creature that looked *sort of* doglike. It had tan fur and a long snout lined with very white and very sharp teeth.

“We found them hunting in the park,” said Thorn.

“And you brought them here?” said the tom, his eyes momentarily fierce.

“They have no coven, Scout,” said Skitter.

“So they say,” the cat muttered. “Mousebane’s not going to be happy.”

Willow was pressing herself to Luna’s side. “Maybe we should go.”

“No,” snapped Luna. Did Willow always have to be so . . . *timid*? She softened her tone. “I mean, not yet.”

It wasn’t quite the welcome she had been hoping for. She noticed another small movement from behind a trash can. A warty toad crawled into view.

“Where is he, anyway?” it croaked.

A shadow fell and a sudden draft of air blasted Luna’s fur. A huge pale creature descended from overhead, landing a few tail-lengths in front of them on top of the swings. Only as it folded its massive, flecked wings did Luna realize it was an owl, but a far larger one than any she’d seen before. The bird’s body was as big as hers, and the yellow talons with which it gripped the metal bar looked like they could tear her flesh with ease. Its face was a moon of short and pristine white feathers, marred by a dark scar that ran from its forehead, through one milky, blind eye, and ended beside its savagely curved beak. The other eye was a perfect yellow ring surrounding a black pupil as dark as midnight. Both stared unblinking. It flapped its wings once, then folded them to its body.

“I’m here,” hooted the owl.

So that’s Mousebane, thought Luna. *He must be their leader.*

Beneath the formidable bird, on one of the swings, alighted another owl. Squat and tawny, this one had sleepy eyes and a self-satisfied look, with small tufty ears.

“And you’re quite right, Scout,” mumbled the smaller owl. “Mousebane is *not* happy.”

“We have rules for a reason,” said Mousebane. Luna couldn’t hold the owl’s relentless gaze and had to lower her eyes. “If this place is discovered, we could all be in danger.”

Luna saw Thorn tuck his tail.

“Honestly, we mean no harm,” she mewed.

“So they’re attuned, at least,” said the smaller owl. “Not just mundane waifs and strays.”

“*Powerfully* attuned,” put in Skitter. “This one’s called Luna. She’s got fire magic like I’ve rarely seen in one so young.”

A ripple of surprise passed across the gathered animals, and now, at last, Mousebane blinked. “Has she, now?”

“And this is my sister, Willow,” added Luna quickly.

The doglike animal perched on the slide jumped down in a single graceful leap and approached them. Luna pressed herself close to her sister. “What can *she* do?” asked the creature.

Willow, trembling a little, seemed too afraid to answer.

“We don’t know yet,” mewed Luna.

“Can she even speak?” asked the tom called Scout.

“Of course I can,” mewed Willow with a defiant glare.

“Well,” said the giant owl, “you are both here now. And I must say, your arrival comes at a . . . curious moment.”

“How’s that?” asked Skitter.

Mousebane turned his round face down to the toad. “Courage, do you think this could be connected with the visions of the Conclave?”

The warty toad puffed out his throat, settling his gaze on Luna and her sister. She almost had the feeling he was looking right into her thoughts.

“I wonder . . . ,” he croaked. “I’ll report back to the other toads of the Conclave. It would make sense to bring up the matter at tonight’s gathering. Maybe then we can also discuss the future of these newcomers.”

Luna didn’t like the sound of that. “Can’t we just join the Wild Alliance?” she asked.

She felt Willow bristle, unsurprisingly. It wasn’t like they’d talked about *any* of this.

“Her magic really *is* something special,” said Skitter.

Mousebane’s stare landed on Luna again, before switching to Willow. “You can attend the meeting as our guests. See how the other covens live and let them see you. I can make no promises.”

Luna surveyed the expectant faces of the other animals, wondering what magic they might be capable of. It was strange to see such a varied group living side by side, predator and prey, natural enemies, and at the same time comforting to learn of the deeper bond they shared.

The sheltered months at the diner seemed such a distant memory—almost another life. Safe, yes, but dull and repetitive. The hidden playground of the Wild Alliance was something else entirely—the promise of a new existence, new companions, and new discoveries.

Last of all, Luna's eyes fell on her sister, standing slightly apart. Perhaps not afraid, exactly, but radiating uncertainty from every strand of gray fur. Luna felt a tickle of guilt.

But if I hadn't pushed her into coming here, we'd never have found out anything *about the world of magic.*

And now their fate—whether they stayed or not—didn't even rest in their own paws. Depending on what this *Conclave* said, it could all be snatched away in an instant.

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Chapter 4

Willow shook the water from her fur, feeling relieved they'd finally made it under a roof—even if the ceiling above them was glass and rattling with the downpour of another rainy night.

This area was once something humans called a *mall*, Skitter had explained on the journey from the playground—a place where humans came to get food and clothes and other objects. Though Skitter had never seen humans here himself, some of the older rats remembered a time when the mall had teemed with them. Now it was derelict. They made their way along the deserted passageways one story above ground level, past compartments that were dark or shuttered with metal doors.

As the rat told them all this, Willow watched her sister drink it in with the same enthusiasm she'd shown all day, since they'd met Skitter and Thorn in the park. Luna couldn't seem to get enough of all the new information the Wild Alliance possessed—all the little secrets about the city and the so-called covens that occupied its forgotten corners. What was true or what was exaggeration didn't seem to trouble her sister. Willow had mostly listened from the sidelines. It wasn't that she didn't *believe* these strangers, but she wasn't as ready as Luna to hang off their every word.

"This place is creepy," she murmured as they followed Mousebane through the gloomy space. The owl flapped and glided ahead in short bursts, leading the way.

"Feels weird," her sister agreed. "Sort of . . . hollow."

Grim—who was not a *dog*, but something called a coyote, *thank you very much*—licked his lips.

"That's because it's 'dead space,'" he growled. "No anima."

“So . . . no magic?” asked Luna.

“You’re learning,” squeaked Skitter, sounding impressed. It seemed to Willow that Luna could do no wrong in the eyes of the Wild Alliance. Ever since they’d seen her fire magic, they’d been treating her as if she was something special.

Maybe she is, thought Willow, *but she’s also* my *sister.*

“The lack of anima makes it safer for us all to meet peacefully,” Skitter was saying. “Neutral ground, you see.”

At least here I’m not a failure, then, thought Willow.

Her experience at the playground had been quite different from her sister’s. The animals of the Wild Alliance had barely given her a second glance. Not that she cared. She didn’t know these creatures. She didn’t need their approval, or their friendship. And the sooner Luna came to the same conclusion, the better.

In the meantime, her being practically invisible to them allowed her to observe them in a way Luna could not. In the hours since their arrival at the playground, Willow had heard her sister’s magic praised many times. But Willow had seen other animals muttering in little groups, throwing looks in Luna’s direction, and she didn’t like it. There was something in their eyes beyond admiration—a harder edge that made her uneasy.

She wondered if she’d be able to defend herself and Luna should these magical animals turn on them. She resisted the urge to try to summon anima again, though. She couldn’t face the humiliation. Luna, she knew, felt sorry for her. She kept saying magic would come once the pressure was off, but what if she was wrong?

What if I’m just . . . defective?

Would the Wild Alliance reject her? And if they did, what would that mean for her and Luna? Her sister seemed ready to make her home with the Wild Alliance, but surely she wouldn’t put them above Willow.

“. . . of course, the Renegades only listen to themselves. The Conclave, on the other paw, only includes toads,” the rat was explaining. “They *claim* they can see the future and are *very* serious about it.

“You think the Conclave will actually show up this time?” Grim grunted as if answering his own question.

“Doubt it,” replied Skitter. “Since the drought started, they’re a law unto themselves.”

Luna opened her mouth, Willow was sure to ask what the *drought* was, but Thorn gave her a subtle shake of his head, as if advising her not to delve into what seemed to be a sore subject.

"Like I said, the anima's not flowing like it used to," said Skitter. "Not as strong. No one knows why. Attuned animals are getting weaker, and it's harder to perform complex magic. Maybe it's something to do with the humans. That's one of the reasons the Truthtellers are trying to encroach into our territory. The park is still rich in anima."

"And why are they called the Truthtellers?"

"Because they think *only* they have the answers. They worship their own animal ancestors and they don't want anything to do with humans."

"What animal would?" Luna replied.

"Well, *bound* animals, of course!" said Skitter.

"Bound?" asked Luna.

Skitter stopped and screwed up his nose. "Oh my, it's a good thing we stumbled across each other. You'd better listen carefully, because this might save your life one day."

Willow dropped any pretense of not being interested and stepped closer.

"Most humans don't know about anima," Skitter said, "but there are a few who practice witchcraft. Only they need *us* to channel the anima—they can't do it themselves. They call us *familiars*."

"Once you're bound to a human, it's almost impossible to get away," Grim added. They drain your magic and never let you out of their sight."

They set off once more.

"And how does it work?" asked Willow. "This binding?"

"Many ways," said Skitter. "Some more painful than others."

"Depends if you're a willing participant, or if you fight it," added Grim. "Just hope you never have to find out."

"It sounds horrible," said Luna.

Willow wondered if her sister was also thinking about the human they'd lived with as newborns. Had he been a witch?

Mousebane had paused on a balcony at the top of a flight of metal stairs overlooking a large circular area below. In the center was a stone fountain in the shape of leaping fish. Its shallow water was stagnant and opaque. Tables and chairs were positioned around the fountain, and Willow guessed it had been one of the eating places where humans liked to gather.

There were creatures waiting down there too. On one side of the fountain sat a smooth-haired black dog with floppy ears and a powerful tail, and beside him a small, scrawny terrier with gray fur, looking around nervously. An imposing raven perched on the back of a chair beside them, bobbing its head. Across from them was a quartet of cats. One had a torn ear, and another was missing its tail. They all looked like seasoned fighters.

"Truthtellers," Thorn whispered to Willow, answering the question in her mind.

"You should stay up here," Mousebane told the sisters. Luna's mouth opened as if she wanted to protest. "We'll call you if you're needed."

Willow was relieved. She wasn't sure she wanted to meet *more* magical creatures.

Luna's eyes, though, fixed on the new creatures, and her ears pricked in a way that annoyed Willow. She knew her sister was excited, but she didn't have to behave like a little kitten.

"What are the Renegades like?" Luna asked.

"Some see them as meddlers, others as saviors," said Skitter. "They see it as their mission to rescue animals who have been bound."

Mousebane hopped from the railing and drifted like a ghostly specter into the forecourt below, alighting on a tabletop. Skitter scurried down the metal stairs after Grim. Willow didn't know why these two had been chosen to accompany Mousebane, but the coyote certainly looked able to handle himself if there was trouble, and Willow had learned that Skitter was the oldest of the rats in the Alliance. The two black-and-white cats—Dawn and Dusk—had seemed only interested in play-fighting under the climbing frame.

It wasn't until Skitter and Grim had taken their places beside Mousebane that Willow saw there were toads present also. Three of them had been sitting on the fountain edge, very still and camouflaged against the stone. Now they stirred their plump little bodies with a chorus of warbles and croaks.

"What say you, Endurance?" hooted Mousebane at one of the toads.

"Let the meeting begin!" she replied.

They must be the Conclave, thought Willow. She hadn't seen the toad called Courage much since their arrival at the playground. He'd mostly been sitting at the water's edge in quiet meditation, before slipping away with a word of farewell.

Maybe all toads are like that. . . .

The black dog—Nightshade—took a few steps forward. He was missing his left front leg below the knee, but it didn't seem to affect his movement much. He had a deep chest where the hair grew thicker and he carried his head high. Even from her vantage point, Willow could see that his muzzle was starting to turn gray.

"Thank you for calling this meeting," he barked. His voice was deeper and gentler than Willow had expected. "We'd like to introduce an ally, freshly liberated in the last two days. Come, Ragwort."

The small terrier stepped forward shyly, his head dipped and his tail tucked.

"Ragwort was snatched as a puppy from the street and bound by a human witch," said Nightshade. "He never knew freedom until we rescued him, but now he will."

"Welcome, Ragwort," croaked Endurance. "We imagine this is all very new to you, but you no longer have to be afraid."

"I . . . I feel strange," muttered the terrier, looking around as if his eyes were following an insect buzzing overhead. "It's like she's still here, close by, watching me."

"The bonds are strong," said Endurance, "but in time they will fray and sever."

"And if they don't?" asked Ragwort with a plaintive whine.

"Then there are other ways. A ritual of unbinding."

"It won't come to that," said Nightshade. "For now, enjoy your freedom."

"You have been living with the Renegades," said Endurance, "but you must choose where you'd like to make your home. Will any of the covens present welcome Ragwort?"

Mousebane bobbed his head and the four Truthteller cats mewed their assent.

"Very well," said the toad. "Ragwort, visit each coven before making your decision."

"Th . . . thank you," mumbled the dog timidly.

"So do *we* get to choose too?" Willow asked her sister.

Luna narrowed her eyes. "I don't know. I guess we'll find out at some point."

"You *guess*?" said Willow. "And until then, we just do what the owl says?" Heat crawled through her pelt. *It's all right for you. They* love *you.*

But they look at me like I'm worthless.

"That isn't what I—"

Willow had heard enough. Before her sister could offer any further protest, she left Luna's side and padded down the motionless escalator. Mousebane ruffled his feathers as he saw her approach. Grim cocked his head. The eyes of the Truthteller cats tracked her in unison, and Willow focused on walking steadily so as not to betray her nerves.

The raven let out a raucous cry.

"What's the meaning of this interruption?" snapped Nightshade. "State your name and coven!"

"I can explain," said Skitter. "This is—"

"My name is Willow. And I can talk for myself."

She was pleased that that brought silence. At least she had time to think. Now that she was in front of the covens, her bravado had deserted her.

"Go on," croaked Endurance.

"My sister and I only met the Wild Alliance today," said Willow. "If this dog gets to choose his coven, so should we."

"Actually, that's *exactly* what I was going to suggest," said Mousebane, fixing Willow with a murderous stare, "if you'd let me finish."

Willow felt her pelt tighten under the owl's eyes but managed to hold his gaze.

"May I say," said a suave voice, "I sympathize with your frustrations."

It was a ginger tom who'd spoken—one of the Truthteller coven. He sloped forward, tail looping slowly back and forth, head held high. "The Wild Alliance do have a habit of thinking they know best."

He was probably old enough to be Willow's father, and he had none of the roughness of his fellow cats. His fur was sleek, and his eyes sparkled with intelligence.

"My name is Sunfire," he went on. "We Truthtellers would be very happy to host you and your sister for a visit tomorrow evening—under the light of the full moon—so you can see how a real coven operates."

Willow glanced up to Luna, wondering how her sister felt about this. But it was too dark, and Luna was bathed in shadow. *She can hardly complain after dragging me around all day.*

"We accept your kind offer," she said to Sunfire.

"Then it's settled," said Endurance. "Luna and Willow will visit the Truthtellers first. And Ragwort can go too."

Sunfire's eyes passed quickly over the scrappy little dog. "Very well. But an animal who has once been bound must prove himself worthy before we could offer him membership."

Only the Wild Alliance looked put out at the toad's suggestion. Grim scratched his neck with a forepaw nervously.

They're just annoyed I made the decision for us, thought Willow.

"And now, Endurance," continued Nightshade, "maybe you can tell us why you summoned us tonight."

The toad eyed them all glassily. Willow couldn't help but be impressed by the way she commanded attention, despite her size.

"Our Conclave has been experiencing a powerful series of visions. Two nights ago, these visions culminated in one, single image. An image of fire. Does this mean anything to any of you?"

Willow's skin felt cold. Of course it *meant* something. Fire had taken their previous home—on the very night these toads saw their visions. Fire was her sister's power. Fire was the reason for *everything* that had happened to them in the last two days.

Yet Luna didn't speak, and neither did any of the Wild Alliance.

They want to keep it a secret. They don't want to lose Luna to another coven, because she's powerful.

Part of Willow wanted to blurt it out, but the moment passed in silence.

Finally, Endurance shifted her weight and turned her gaze directly onto Willow. "Your name is Willow, you say? And that's your sister, skulking in the shadows. . . ."

"Er . . . hi!" mewed her sister from above. "I'm Luna."

"Mousebane wanted us to wait up there," said Willow.

"But you didn't," warbled Endurance. It wasn't a question, but it came with a questioning tilt of her head. Endurance let out a throaty chuckle. "Mousebane is wise to be cautious," she said. "Luna and Willow. Moon and tree. How interesting."

She didn't expand on the thought, but Willow was left with the sensation that the old toad knew far more than she was letting on. And more—that she could see into the very depths of Willow's heart. Willow was half-afraid of what she might see there.

Mousebane hooted from above, and everyone turned to look up at the owl.

“Forgive the kitten’s impetuousness, Endurance,” he called. “Both Willow and her sister are unfamiliar with our customs. They came to us by chance.”

Endurance swelled her throat, the skin almost transparent, holding the pose as if deep in thought. “Nothing happens by chance alone,” she said at last.

Willow wondered if that was really true. If they hadn’t walked into the park, if they hadn’t seen the pigeons, they’d never have bumped into the talking rat and his companion.

It could all have been so much simpler, she thought wistfully.

“Make them welcome for now,” continued the toad, “and we will send word when they are required.”

Required?

Willow didn’t like the sound of that.

She glanced around, and saw other animals looking surprised by this order, but no one challenged it. She was about to speak up—to ask who exactly these toads thought they were—but Endurance’s glare somehow made the words dry up in her throat.

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Chapter 5

Into the unknown again, thought Luna as the nighttime breeze tickled her fur.

Above, Mousebane and Coalclaw, the raven from the Renegades, swooped in and out of each other's paths as their small party crept through the dark streets, avoiding any humans. As Sunfire had promised, the moon was full tonight, casting the city in a silver glow.

Luna had spent much of the day in a fitful slumber, each time waking in a panic only to realize that she was perfectly safe, still at the hidden playground, surrounded by her new friends in the Wild Alliance. She wasn't sure she'd ever get used to the strange sight of such different creatures just *hanging out*.

In her wakeful hours, she tried to learn more about each of them—how they'd come to be at the playground and what they thought about the other covens. One thing everyone seemed to agree on was that the Conclave were the authority on anima. She was greedy to find out more. . . .

If only my sister could show a sliver of the same interest.

Willow had barely spoken to her all day, preferring to wander in the trees alone or spend time with Ragwort, the dog rescued by the Renegades. They had really taken to each other. He seemed a gentle enough creature, even if he always looked a bit sorry for himself. Luna's sister was chatting with him now as they made their way to visit the Truthtellers.

"So what do you think of the Renegades?" she asked.

"They're okay, I suppose," said Ragwort. "Their lair is in a junkyard, under a railway bridge. It's well hidden. You can't even get in without knowing the symbol. You have to stand on this old blue car and scratch the

glass of the windshield in the right way.” He hopped clumsily on three legs and moved his front paw in a pattern. “Then it just sort of . . . appears.”

Mousebane swooped low. “Not far now,” he said. “Be careful—sometimes there are cars.”

As the owl rose again with a few strong wing thrusts, Luna was grateful for his calming presence. It was easy to see why the Wild Alliance had chosen him as their leader. Earlier that day, Skitter had told her that Mousebane rarely stopped talking of Luna’s abilities. They clearly wanted her to join them, and Luna couldn’t deny that the idea excited her. To be part of something, to learn to harness anima, and to explore the city—it would be a new life.

I shouldn’t decide before I’ve actually met the other covens, though, thought Luna.

From her conversations with the other members of the Wild Alliance, she had learned there was no love lost between their coven and the Truthtellers. Apparently, the Truthtellers had some very weird beliefs that were strictly enforced, and anyone who broke the rules could be kicked out without a second thought.

There were worse stories, too. Though actual conflict rarely happened between the covens, when it did, it could be very violent. Skitter said one of his rat friends, Gnasher, had disappeared the summer before, and though no one could prove it, it was said he’d had a run-in with a Truthteller patrol.

Of course, the coven she joined wouldn’t only be up to her.

It all depends on what the Conclave decides.

Swivel the owl had casually dropped it into conversation earlier in the day. The final say on whether they could join a coven *at all* lay with the toads, and there was no rushing the decision. Luna wasn’t sure why it worked that way, but apparently it had something to do with them reading the anima.

“Don’t worry about it,” the little owl had said. “It’s very rare for anyone to be denied.”

“Why was the decision so quick for Ragwort but not us?” Luna had asked. “He was just told he could choose right away.”

“Ragwort is . . . uncomplicated,” Swivel had replied. “But isn’t it more exciting to be special?”

Easy for you to say, Luna had thought. *Your whole future isn’t hanging in the balance.*

“But you must be pleased they rescued you . . . ,” Willow was saying.

Ragwort gave himself a shake. “Oh, yes. Of course. I mean, I never *asked* to be bound in the first place.”

“Was it horrible?” asked Willow.

“I’ve heard it *can* be,” said Ragwort. “Some witches are worse than others. And if they force the binding, it can be painful. But I don’t really remember the day I was bound. I was so young.”

“That’s probably why you didn’t get a say,” said Luna, quickening her steps and sliding her body between them.

Maybe it was just an accident, but her sister changed her course a little, slightly knocking Luna off balance and reasserting her position beside Ragwort.

“And how does it *feel*?” her sister asked. “Being bound. . . .”

“It’s hard to say,” answered Ragwort. “I barely remember a time before. But now that we’re apart, it’s like there’s something inside me slowly shrinking. I guess at some point it will disappear entirely.”

“And you’re free!” said Luna. “I can’t think of anything worse than being bound to a human . . . ugh!”

“I don’t know,” said Willow thoughtfully. “Was it actually bad?”

Ragwort licked his lips. “I mean . . . I never really thought about it.”

“I guess you had a home, and plenty of food,” said Willow. “That counts for something.”

Luna shot a glance at her sister and almost said, *Like we did, with our mother?* She managed to stop herself. Willow didn’t like talking about that night any more than she did. Instead, she put on a brighter tone.

“At least in a coven, other animals have your back,” she said. “And you get to do your own magic!”

Only as she said it did she realize that neither was quite true for Willow. The Wild Alliance had welcomed *her*, but Willow must feel a bit left out.

They continued in an uneasy silence until they reached steps descending from the street level into darkness. Sunfire sat proudly on the top step, his orange fur gleaming in the moonlight. Coalclaw touched down on a streetlamp above, but Mousebane glided in low and landed right in front of Luna, her sister, and Ragwort, blocking their path.

“I’ll be waiting right here when you’re done with your visit,” he said. “Don’t stay too long.”

“We’ll be fine,” said Willow, sounding a bit exasperated and trying to look past the owl. “We’re not newborn kittens!”

“Very well,” said Mousebane, turning his focus to Luna. “If you need me, just call out.”

Luna couldn’t tell if the owl was genuinely concerned for their safety or just anxious about losing her—and her fire magic—to another coven. But she remembered what Skitter had said about Gnasher and swallowed thickly.

“We’ll be careful,” she said to Mousebane, who hopped aside to let them pass.

Sunfire rose from his seated position at their approach.

“Greetings, Luna and Willow,” he purred. “And Ragwort. If you’d like to come this way?”

He spun lithely around and sauntered down the steps. Luna, Willow, and Ragwort followed.

As they descended, the air became chilly, and they crossed a scuffed tiled floor, passing walls pasted with peeling pieces of paper and faded pictures and the bright squiggles humans left everywhere. Sunfire had to dip his head under a metal gate, but the sisters and Ragwort were small enough to pass beneath easily. It seemed they were heading for an escalator, until the tom cat veered toward a door with a cracked grate at the bottom. He folded his body through and, following, they found themselves in a stairwell. The air was stale and damp.

“The humans haven’t used this place for a generation,” said Sunfire as he descended the stairs. “Their tunnels spread for miles.” His voice was tinged with a sneer. “They must have used animal magic to build them.”

Ragwort, Luna noted, looked very nervous, his eyes darting left and right into the shadows.

“It’s okay,” Willow muttered to him.

She hadn’t offered any words of encouragement to Luna. In fact, she seemed to have largely forgotten her sister now she had the dog to talk to.

Oh well, thought Luna. *At least she seems a bit happier now.*

For the first time in a while, Luna’s own pelt prickled with fear. She tried not to show it as they went down floor after floor, and it *may* have been her imagination, but the walls felt like they were closing in, the shaft shrinking with each level they went farther from the surface. Apart from the shuffle of

their own paw steps and Ragwort's panting, she could hear another sound—distant trains in tunnels unseen.

"So you Truthtellers don't much like humans?" she said, hoping a little conversation would distract her.

Sunfire's mouth curled in a snarl. "I have nothing against those who keep to themselves. They're no more interesting than other mundane animals. It's the witches we despise—those who seek to bind us. The anima is a gift to all creatures—except humans. That's why the witches need to steal our powers."

"Are there many witches?" Willow asked from behind her. Luna guessed her sister was thinking, as she was, of the human they'd lived with when they were small. Was it possible that he'd been a witch? And if so, that their own mother had been attuned?

"There were more once," said Sunfire, "but their numbers have shrunk as the city has grown."

He led them through a door and paused in a small room lined with pipes and exposed cables. Ahead was a closed door. "We have arrived," said the cat.

Luna couldn't see how they were supposed to pass through the door, but Sunfire instead faced the wall. From his mouth came a series of sibilant hissing sounds, as if he were speaking a language she didn't understand. Slowly, a patch of the wall began to fade.

Willow sucked in a breath, and Luna's heartbeat quickened.

Beyond the vanishing door lay a vast open space—a chamber of arches and vaults made of dark brick.

Sunfire glanced back over his shoulder. "Welcome to the lair of the Truthtellers," he said before stepping over the threshold.

The space was cavernous and surprisingly light, with pieces of broken glass and mirrors scattered around the walls and floor, glinting like shards of silver. The source of the illumination was a shaft overhead, through which Luna spied the perfect white orb of the moon. The system of mirrors somehow reflected it onto the ground below, forming a circle of light in which animals lay prostrate, as if bathing in the glow. There were several cats, two dogs, a possum, some rodents, and a trio of rabbits. No toads that Luna could see. They were all chanting softly in discordant voices. The sounds were hard to make out, but the rhythm reminded Luna of the words Sunfire had used to access the hidden lair.

Around the dank walls, symbols had been painted, daubed in red and white. Some were just shapes and swirls, but others had the form of animals—their features distorted and awry. A cat had tall and sharp ears and teeth that extended from its mouth like tusks. An owl had wing feathers that looked like spines of bone. A toad was impossibly fat, with one eye on its forehead and a forked tongue like a snake.

"Those are our gods," said Sunfire, noticing Luna staring. "We dedicate ourselves to bearing their message, far and wide. We trust in their guidance in all we do."

"You can . . . hear them?" asked Ragwort, his voice cracking.

"Join us," said Sunfire, "and in time you will too." His eyes glinted in the dark.

Luna shuddered. Compared with the fresh air and greenery of the Wild Alliance's playground, this place felt so cold and severe.

"You probably find our ways unusual," said Sunfire, "but if you choose to remain with us you will begin to understand our faith. There's no greater calling."

"Can't you tell us a little more about it, before we have to choose?" asked Willow, hesitantly.

Sunfire took a few steps closer to Willow, lowering his head slightly to peer at her. "You know, you remind me of a she-cat I once knew. One I could not protect."

Luna's breath caught in her throat. Was it possible that Sunfire had met their mother?

"Of course, I wasn't a leader then," continued Sunfire. "If things had been different . . . if I'd been braver . . . maybe I could have saved her."

He looked away, overcome by emotion. The light suddenly dipped, the mirrors turning black. Above, in the aperture, the moon had disappeared from sight. In the same moment, the chanting stopped and the animals, cast in shadow, stretched and shook themselves, as though awakening from slumber.

"You are welcome to stay and eat with us," said Sunfire. "Our gods have granted us plenty to share. If you become one of us, you'll see that we have advantages the other covens do not."

He nodded toward the side of the chamber, where a heap of fur and feathers lay in a tangle. Clearly the Truthtellers were accomplished hunters, and the members of the coven all looked well-fed.

Luna considered Sunfire's offer, but she could tell from the faces of the other two that they'd had quite enough of the Truthteller lair. Ragwort was actually trembling a little and hiding behind her sister.

Willow had noticed Ragwort too, and she stroked his side with her tail. "We should be getting back," she said. "Mousebane will be worried."

Sunfire treated the terrier to a scornful glance, then let his eyes settle on Luna, as if daring her to contradict her sister. But Luna wouldn't do that. *Not in front of the Truthtellers, anyway.*

"Yes, we'd better go," she said.

"Very well," Sunfire finally purred. "I will see you out."

"We can find our own way," said Willow, hitching her chin.

"I don't doubt it," said Sunfire with a wry look, "but Endurance and the Conclave would never forgive me if you got lost down here. After all, everyone is quite excited about the strength of your powers."

He wasn't looking at Luna as he spoke, but the words were addressed in her direction. *Does Sunfire want me to join the Truthtellers because I can make fire?* And though she was flattered, she was glad to turn her back on the cold arches and bizarre images and begin the journey upward.

As they rose through the subterranean maze, each breath felt fresher than the last. Luna found herself considering what Sunfire had said about the cat he'd tried to save. For so long, she had buried thoughts of her mother as much as she could. But now she found herself wanting to ask him more. She knew Willow would see talking to a stranger about their shared history as a betrayal, though.

Well, she was my mother too! And I bet she's told Ragwort. Every time she turned around, Willow and Ragwort were deep in conversation. Luna had a right to friendships other than her sister's as well.

And if Sunfire has answers . . .

They reached the station again and climbed the steps back to the outside world. Mousebane was waiting on top of a post across the street. Coalclaw was nowhere to be seen, and Luna guessed she'd returned to the Renegades' junkyard.

Ragwort eagerly scampered up the last few steps, and Willow followed. Luna hesitated alongside Sunfire. She waited until Willow and Ragwort were out of earshot before asking him, "The she-cat you mentioned. I suppose she was attuned?"

“Oh, very much so,” said Sunfire wistfully. “The anima seemed to cling to her like a second skin.”

“And that sort of thing—the magic . . . does it pass down from one generation to the next?”

“Come, Luna—we should get back,” hooted Mousebane.

Can’t you just give me a moment. . . .

“Most of the time, yes,” said Sunfire.

“Did she have any kittens, do you know?”

“If she did, she never told me,” said Sunfire. His eyes fixed on hers. “It seems to me that you’re seeking answers, Luna. A life of idleness and ease with the Wild Alliance may look attractive. But ask yourself—will it be enough?”

With those words, he turned and disappeared into the shadows.

Later that night, back at the playground, stars sprinkled the sky as Luna struggled to get comfortable in her nest under the slide. Willow and Ragwort were still talking in low tones in the plastic tunnel above her head, but she resisted the urge to ask for quiet. It would only look like she was jealous of her sister’s attention.

Anyway, it’s good Willow has someone to talk to.

And it wasn’t really the hum of their conversation that was keeping her awake, but her own thoughts about their visit to the Truthteller lair. Sunfire’s words still echoed through her mind, as hypnotic as the chants reverberating through their vaulted chamber. It was his mention of the she-cat that disturbed her the most.

Luna drifted on the edge of sleep and memory, trying to place herself back in the half-remembered days when their mother had been alive. She pushed her mind to recall the exact shape of her mother’s face, her fur, her smell. Were there any clues that her mother had been attuned?

It was impossible to know. Back then, her only concern had been playing with Willow, and when the next feeding time would fill her stomach.

As she fell deeper into slumber, she found herself back in those days of warmth and love, of thick rugs, milk, and dozing. She lost herself in the rhythms of her mother’s steady breathing.

Later, it was Willow who nudged her awake. Blackness had hidden any starlight.

“I heard something,” mewled her sister.

As her eyes sharpened to the dark, Luna knew she was dreaming because Willow was much younger, her face still plump with downy fur. And she knew what would happen next, because it was the same dream as before.

“I don’t want to see,” she mewed.

But her paws carried her regardless, drifting over the floor. The sinking sensation in her belly sharpened to a hot dread. With Willow at her side, she rounded a doorway. She didn’t want to look, but she couldn’t turn away. There he was, by the window, feet planted wide, silhouetted, his spectacles dark and concealing his eyes. Beads of sweat on his shining bald head. Teeth gritted in a terrible grimace.

His arms were thrust out, his thick and hairy forearms covered in red.

More red on the floor. Thick spatters, dripping from his fingers.

And in his murdering hands, draped and lifeless, their mother’s dead body.

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Chapter 6

The evening was peaceful, the air heavy and unseasonably warm. The sun had gone down, but a soft light lingered. And though Willow's belly was full and she knew she should feel tired, sleep wouldn't come.

The hunt had been a great success. At least, the rest of the Wild Alliance thought so.

And most of all, they thanked Luna for it.

From a climbing platform in the playground, Willow watched her sister playing with Dawn and Dusk. She was pretending to sleep, letting them stalk her like prey, only to leap up and chase them down, rolling them over gently in the grass.

They love her, thought Willow. *The whole coven does.*

Over the course of the day, the Wild Alliance had caught several mundane birds and two squirrels, all startled from the trees or corralled by Luna's fire magic. Thorn said that Luna channeled the anima better than any creature he'd encountered.

Apart from the young cats, the other members of the coven were curled up and snoozing in their nests of foliage and fallen leaves. Mousebane and the smaller owl, Swivel, had taken to their roosts in the branches of a tree.

Her sister's laughter tinkled below. Willow couldn't remember the last time Luna had looked so happy and carefree. She hadn't been like this at the diner, anyway, when it had just been the two of them.

Was I just holding her back? she asked herself. *Did she always secretly want to leave?*

Her eyes drifted from the cats toward the edges of the playground. Ragwort was lying on his belly under a park bench, head on paws, staring

into the shadows beneath the trees. Between them, Willow and the dog hadn't achieved much of note during the hunt. Willow felt she'd actually *lost* some of her old sharpness since the day they'd first encountered Skitter and Thorn. She had managed to snatch one lousy squirrel, but considering how tough it had been to chew, she expected it was old anyway, an easy catch. Once again, she'd tried to find the anima for herself—maybe it would help her with hunting—but, once again, nothing had happened. Ragwort hadn't caught anything—he was a bit too heavy-footed and clumsy to properly stalk any prey, and at one point had managed to roll into a bog, caking himself from head to tail in sticky, and somewhat smelly, mud.

"I never had to hunt before," he'd told the others morosely afterward.

Willow picked herself up from her platform, leaped down to the ground, and padded over to where he was lying. His eyebrows kinked up at her approach.

"Can't sleep either?" he rumbled softly.

Willow curled up beside him. There were still flecks of dried mud in his fur.

"You're not the only one who found the hunting hard," said Willow.

Ragwort yawned. "When I was with Leanne—she was my witch—the magic was all healing spells, not rabbit catching or whatever."

"You sound like you miss it," said Willow.

Ragwort turned his head across the playground, surveying the other creatures in their sleeping spots.

"I miss *her*," he whispered. "I mean, I know what Nightshade said—that it was wrong of her to bind me, that I had no choice. But Leanne was nice. Sick people used to come to her, and she did her best to cure them." He looked at Willow. "I was *useful*. In this place, I'm just a burden." Ragwort let out a sniff. "I didn't even ask to be set free!" He glanced about again quickly, as if scared his outburst might have woken someone, before continuing in a quieter voice. "Don't get me wrong, the Wild Alliance are probably the best of the covens, but what are they actually *doing*, other than just surviving and being paranoid about their territory?" He paused. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. They clearly think a lot of you and your sister."

"They like Luna," Willow corrected. Her throat felt tight as she said it. She tried to sound matter-of-fact, to disguise the ache of self-pity. "I'm just tagging along."

“As for the Truthtellers, no thanks,” said Ragwort. “Did you see those pictures on the walls? Creepy! I’ll never fit in with any of these covens.”

That’s exactly how I feel, thought Willow. *And Sunfire clearly only wanted Luna anyway, just like the Wild Alliance.* They hadn’t visited the Renegades yet, but she doubted she or Ragwort belonged with them either.

“You don’t have to,” she purred.

We *don’t have to. . . .*

Ragwort’s ear pricked up, his eyes softening at the edges. “Don’t I?”

“No one’s keeping you here,” said Willow. Again, she was speaking to herself as much as her new friend. “Just leave.”

“But the toads said—”

“Who cares?” said Willow. “When did you ever listen to a toad before yesterday?”

Ragwort licked his lips nervously. “Maybe you’re right, but I think the Wild Alliance would try to stop me.”

“They can’t if they’re asleep,” said Willow. A thrill passed the length of her spine. It felt good to be planning something. To be taking control. “I’m pretty good at sneaking around. I’ll help you leave—if you want?”

“Really?” Ragwort’s tail gave a small wag. “Leanne might even take me back. I *think* I can find her again. . . .”

Dusk had taken hold, chasing the last of the heat from the air. “When the moon rises over the trees, meet me back here,” said Willow. “Everyone will be asleep.”

“What are you two whispering about?”

Willow felt the voice of her sister like an electric shock and gave a squeal. Luna had hopped up onto the bench above their heads. Ragwort pulled back his lips and looked particularly guilty.

“Nothing interesting,” said Willow casually.

Luna’s gaze wasn’t exactly warm. She seemed to be waiting for her sister to say more, but Willow had no intention of giving her that satisfaction.

Maybe you shouldn’t have been eavesdropping on us!

“Well, I’m going to get some sleep,” Luna said at last. “All that fire magic has worn me out.”

“I bet,” said Willow, hoping it sounded sincere. And she *did* mean it. Though she was envious, seeing her sister summon the flames was both terrifying and awe-inspiring at the same time. “You were amazing, by the way.”

Luna gave her a fond look, her mouth open as if she was about to say something else, perhaps the same empty hope that Willow would soon show *some* magical promise. But she seemingly thought better of it, and Willow was glad. She was tired of being condescended to, and she didn't need to be mothered by her sister. Whatever relationship they'd had before, and however much she'd once relied on Luna, they were both growing up. Things had changed.

Willow watched her sister walk back to the climbing apparatus, trying to ignore the empty feeling in her heart.

Willow waited until she was sure her sister was in a deep sleep in her nest under the swings before uncurling her own body. The moon was hidden behind thin clouds like a pale smudge over the tree line. She half suspected Ragwort might have changed his mind, but he was there, crouched by the bench. One ear was pulled back, the other cocked as he heard her approach. His breath was misting on the air.

"Let's do this," he said.

Willow scanned the trees, looking for any sign of the owls as she and Ragwort made their way quickly to a tumbledown fence that would offer some concealment. From there it wasn't far to the river that marked the threshold of the hidden territory. They headed a little upstream, then started to make their way over, with Willow leading, placing each step with care. She had never liked dipping her paw in even the shallowest of puddles. Something Luna had always found *hilarious* . . .

But the stones were still slippery. She was just about to warn Ragwort of this when his rear paw slid from under him. He scrambled for balance, twisting his body, but it only made things worse, and his whole rear end went under with a splash. Willow held her breath. The noise seemed deafening in the nighttime quiet. Seconds passed. Maybe they'd been lucky. . . .

A bark split the night.

"Who goes there?"

A bush stirred, some twenty tail-lengths away, and from beneath it, Thorn stuck out his nose.

Panic shot through Willow. He must have been on guard duty, she realized.

Ragwort had frozen, dripping, with eyes wide and one paw raised midstream. Thorn hadn't spotted them yet—he was looking the wrong way—but it wouldn't be long. Time seemed to slow as he sniffed the air, his tail erect. Then, slowly, he turned toward their location.

No time to hide. . . .

Willow wanted so desperately to simply disappear, to let the darkness swallow both of them.

Almost as she thought it, she felt the night pressing closer, like a physical thing, a wind that surged from all directions at once. But there was no wind. Nothing tickled her fur. It was something she'd tasted before, when hunting, but never so strong. Was this *anima*? It bathed her, flooding her limbs, and a great swathe of shadow thickened around them both.

Thorn had turned completely and was staring right in their direction, but to Willow's astonishment there was nothing in the set of his body that indicated he could see them. His eyes passed over her, over Ragwort, and then on. His tail drooped. After patrolling a few steps along the bank, he returned to his dozing spot, curling up under the bush.

As Willow breathed out, the shadows clinging to them evaporated, leaving them exposed once again. Her body felt light, exultant, like she was floating on her paws.

So I am *attuned!*

Ragwort's limbs unlocked, and he made his way—much more carefully—to the far bank on which Willow waited. "You never mentioned you could do that," he said, eyeing her nervously.

"I . . . I didn't know I could," she said. "I felt the anima and it just sort of happened."

"Well, thank you. We'd never have made it otherwise."

Willow was shocked by her magic, but she knew it was risky to delay any longer. Ragwort was staring across the park, looking suddenly unsure.

"You should go," she said, rubbing her head into Ragwort's neck.

He gave her forehead a lick. "Thank you again, Willow," he said. "I hope you find your place too."

For a moment, Willow thought about going with him, but guilt stopped her. She wondered where such a thought had even come from. Whatever gap was opening between her and her sister, Luna would never forgive her for leaving without warning.

And Ragwort had somewhere to go. It wasn't like she'd even been invited.

"Something tells me we'll see each other again," she purred softly.

And with that, Ragwort ran off into the park.

A short while later, Willow slunk back across the river, following the pattern of footsteps she'd learned from Thorn. She kept the darkness clutched around her, hiding her, until she was back near her nest in the playground. She was surprised, and elated, at how easy it had been to summon the shadow-pelt a second time—it was as though she had an extra sense, dormant before, to taste the anima all around her. She found she was purring to herself as she strode between the playground equipment.

But what had changed? When they'd been hunting earlier, she had felt clumsy and useless, but now it was the opposite. She felt like she was folding her body between this reality and a different, magical place where others couldn't see her. Maybe it was just because Luna hadn't been watching. Once there was no expectation, the magic had simply flowed.

But it was still exhausting, and after the excitement of the near-miss with Thorn, she wanted nothing more than to close her eyes and drift into oblivion. She wondered how she would tell her sister that she'd discovered her magical ability. She imagined the looks on the faces of the Wild Alliance when they saw that she too could summon the anima and perform incredible feats.

Or maybe I won't tell them at all. Why should I? They already decided I was hopeless.

What good would it do her, anyway? They'd no doubt change their attitude toward her, probably offering the same flatteries they'd been showering over Luna. But none of that was real affection. They would likely see her as another tool in the great struggle with the other covens.

It would be better just to talk to Luna, at least at first. Once her sister saw what she was capable of, she would realize they didn't need a coven at all. With their combined magic, they'd be a formidable pair, able to handle whatever the city threw in their path.

Willow jumped up into her nest, shifting around the foliage to make a comfy spot. As she did, her whiskers prickled, and she shot a glance toward

the swings. Perhaps she'd imagined it, but for a moment she was sure she saw a pair of eyes, reflecting dimly, staring in her direction.

It's nothing. Stop worrying.

Willow settled, her mind drifting back to Ragwort. She really had no idea how the other animals would react to his disappearance. None of them had been particularly friendly to him, but that didn't mean they'd be happy he'd gone in hopes of rejoining the very witch the Renegades had "saved" him from. The memory of what she'd helped him do gave her a tickle of unease. Maybe she hadn't broken any actual *rules*, but she suspected some of them might see it differently. She began to rehearse in her head the expressions of bewilderment she'd make when his absence was discovered. The problem was, she had never had much cause to tell a lie, and she wasn't sure she could pull it off.

Willow looked across at Luna's nest. Her sister seemed sound asleep.

She was sure that Thorn hadn't seen her, but if Luna had been awake, what exactly might she have witnessed? And what might she say to the others?

A few days ago, Willow would have trusted Luna with her life.

But now she wasn't so sure.

If it came to a choice between telling the truth, or protecting her sister, could Luna be trusted with a secret?

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Chapter 7

Luna felt like she'd barely fallen asleep before the barking and shrieking shook her awake. She sprang to her paws, looking for any sign of attack. Maybe Truthtellers had infiltrated the playground, or humans had found their way in. But it was Swivel the owl who was leading the cries, and the first clear words Luna heard were a hooted, "He's gone! He's gone!"

And then she knew that it was Ragwort, and what she'd seen in the midnight hours was exactly what she'd suspected—he'd been running away, and her sister, for some unfathomable reason, had aided his escape. A sluggish dread settled in her stomach.

"Who's *gone*?" growled Grim, dipping into a long stretch.

"Ragwort," squeaked Skitter, who was crowded by the other rats. "His nest is empty, and he's nowhere to be found."

"He can't have left," said Grim, head jerking about.

Dawn and Dusk came darting from opposite directions, both breathing hard. "I searched among the trees," said the mostly black cat.

"And I went up and down the stream," said the mostly white one. "There's a faint scent of dog, but I lost it."

Willow emerged sleepily from her nest, her manner completely at odds with the panic around her. "What's the big deal?" she asked. "He was just visiting, wasn't he? He's not even a member of the coven."

Luna caught her eye for just a moment, searching for any sign of guilt. There was nothing, and that brought a mixture of shock and confusion, as if for a moment the gray cat before her wasn't the kitten she'd grown up with, but another cat altogether. *She's not exactly lying, but she's hardly being*

honest. Yet there wasn't even an outward hint that Willow knew what was going on.

"He's not," said Skitter. "But this isn't right. He might have been taken!"

That set off more raucous cries.

From the top of the swings, Mousebane let out a squawk that silenced the clamor.

"Whatever has happened," he hooted, "this is very serious. The Renegades entrusted Ragwort to us. After all the work they put in to free him, they won't thank us for letting him wander off."

Luna hid her bemused expression by pretending to scratch her ears. It seemed to her that Mousebane was more worried about their reputation among the covens than he was about Ragwort's well-being.

"He's vulnerable too," growled Grim. "He's only recently separated from his bound human. He could be in danger, whether he knows it or not."

Luna again stole a look at her sister. If the coyote's words caused her any flicker of concern, she managed to conceal it. Luna began to doubt herself.

Maybe she's not lying. Maybe my eyes were fooling me last night after all. . . .

She began to feel relieved.

Thorn gave a nervous whine. "I have something to . . . I need to tell you something. I'm not completely sure, and maybe I shouldn't say any—"

"Spit it out," said Swivel.

"Yeah, if you know something, tell us!" said Skitter.

Thorn shuffled forward sheepishly. "Last night, I was on watch, but I *might* have dozed off, just for a few seconds."

"Did you now?" Mousebane hooted, fixing Thorn with a glare.

Thorn's trail drooped. "I . . . I heard a noise, upstream," he continued, staring at the ground. "And when I looked, even though it was dark, I thought I saw a dog."

"So why didn't you stop him?" asked Swivel.

"Well, they vanished," said Ragwort.

"*They?*" said several animals at once.

"There was a cat too—I think. I walked to the spot where I thought I'd seen them, but they weren't there. So I assumed I was half dreaming." His voice took on a plaintive edge. "We've all been worrying about Truthtellers, haven't we? I thought it must have been my mind playing tricks."

“You should have woken us!” snarled Grim. “He wouldn’t have gotten far.”

“Now isn’t the time for criticism,” said Mousebane. “The more worrying thing is that it sounds as though Ragwort had help to escape. Help from a cat.”

So my eyes weren’t fooling me . . . , Luna thought. She fought the urge to look directly at Willow, but the other animals weren’t so subtle. They stared right at her sister.

“Why do you think it was me?” Willow mewled.

It was sort of obvious, Luna thought. Her sister was clearly unhappy here, and everyone had seen how close she was to Ragwort, having their little chats away from the others. It was hardly likely to have been Dusk or Dawn, and that left only the sisters.

And they trust me. . . .

“Was it you?” asked Mousebane. His tone was matter-of-fact, but the glare down his hooked beak was cold enough to freeze blood.

“No,” said Willow, flashing a blue-eyed gaze across the assembled animals. “Thorn must be mistaken. I was sleeping all night.”

Again, the ease with which her sister lied came as a surprise to Luna. Maybe it shouldn’t have. *She never had a reason to lie before, when it was the two of us. We were always side by side, with nothing to hide.*

“I bet it *was* her,” hissed Skitter. “She’s never liked us.”

“Who else could it be?” added Swivel.

“I *did* see a cat,” muttered Thorn, sounding more confident. “I smelled one too.”

Willow cringed a little, and Grim the coyote let out a growl and advanced. For the first time since meeting the Wild Alliance, Luna sensed danger in the air. *This could turn nasty.*

Her claws slid from their sheaths by instinct. If it came to it, she’d never let them hurt Willow. Grim seemed to sense the rise in tension and stopped in his tracks.

Mousebane stood completely still, but now blinked slowly.

“Willow, this is your last chance to tell the truth.”

Willow held her body stiff and remained silent, staring down the owl. Luna knew if it were her, she wouldn’t be able to keep her composure so well. The moment stretched on, until she did the only thing she could think of.

“It was me,” she mewed.

Every gaze switched from Willow to Luna.

“*You?*” said Dusk, tail lashing in disgust.

“I accompanied Ragwort,” she said. “I didn’t help him escape. I actually tried to persuade him to stay, but he wouldn’t be talked out of it. I didn’t realize it was so serious.”

“And why didn’t you say anything until now?” asked Mousebane.

Willow, Luna noticed, didn’t seem the slightest bit relieved to be out of harm’s way. She stared at Luna, her tail twitching with anger and her ears turned back. Skitter scratched his whiskers, baffled. Thorn’s whole body seemed to sag with disappointment. Luna knew she was letting the Wild Alliance down. And now that she’d done so, she owed them an explanation.

“I was scared,” said Luna. “You were all so angry. I guess I felt guilty too—you’ve been so kind to us, and I’ve let you down.”

Would they believe her? Willow had made lying look easy, but even as Luna spoke, the words sounded fake and hollow.

“You haven’t let anyone down,” said Mousebane at last. “Our customs are new to you. It’s my fault also—I could see Ragwort wasn’t settling. I should have anticipated something like this.”

Luna was grateful but squirmed with discomfort. The difference in the reactions to her and Willow was impossible to miss. Grim had looked ready to launch himself at her sister, but with Luna’s admission, all his anger had disappeared, just like that.

“Our priority now,” hooted Mousebane, “is to find Ragwort and bring him back. Hopefully he hasn’t left the park. Go in groups, use your magic. Skitter, Thorn—you take the other rats. Courage, on Grim’s back. I will scour from the sky. Dawn and Dusk, you can form a pair. . . .”

“And I’ll go with my sister,” said Luna. *I need to talk to her.*

“That makes sense,” said Swivel. “At least one of you has magic.”

It probably wasn’t meant as a jibe, but Luna saw Willow flinch.

“Go now,” said Mousebane. “And may the anima guide you.”

Once they were alone, Luna didn’t know what to say. And by Willow’s silence, it appeared she didn’t either. It felt like a barrier had grown between them, a block of dense air swirling with emotions and recriminations. She had no clue what her sister was thinking, and she hardly dared to look at

her. But as they walked side by side, Willow seemed to burn with a rage that Luna could almost feel against her pelt.

The longer the silence lasted, the greater Luna's own rage became.

Is she still going to pretend I did it, even to me? Is she really so much of a coward that she can't admit what she's done? One thing Luna knew for sure: Despite casting over-the-top glances around as if they were searching for Ragwort, neither was really looking for him. All their focus was on each other.

Finally, Luna could hold her tongue no longer, and the pressure that had been building released in a hiss.

"Just tell the *truth*, will you?"

Willow stopped in her tracks. They were where they'd hunted the pigeons a lifetime ago. It was an overcast day, spitting with rain, so fortunately there weren't many humans. A few were rushing around in the distance, throwing a round object between them.

"Why did you lie?" mewed Willow, not meeting her eye.

"That's rich, coming from you," spat Luna. "I lied to protect you. Because I don't *understand* you."

"Maybe you never did," murmured Willow.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

A breeze brushed her sister's fur. They were standing just a tail's length from each other, but it could have been a whole city that separated them. Under her anger, Luna felt a crack across her heart.

"Fine," said Willow. "I helped him. You didn't have to take the blame."

"I did it for you."

"Did you?" whined Willow. "Or were you annoyed not to be the center of attention for a change?"

The words cut deep, and hot anger surged through Luna's body.

"I wanted us *both* to be accepted into the coven," she said. "But you seem determined to ruin it."

"Can't you see?" said Willow. "They don't want *me*. It's easy for you, summoning your fire at will."

"But you have magic too!" said Luna. "I saw it. You weren't there, and then you were. You did something with the anima, and it completely hid you. Honestly, it was incredible!"

For a heartbeat, she saw something like pride in her sister's eyes, but it was quickly replaced by sadness.

“I didn’t even know about it until last night,” said Willow. “And why should I let *them* have my power? They think I’m useless. They’ve decided I’m no better than a mundane.”

Luna couldn’t deny it.

“You could have told me, though. I’m your sister. I’m happy for you.”

“Are you?”

“How can you say that? After everything we’ve been through.”

They lapsed into silence. Luna tried to put herself in Willow’s paws, to see the world through her eyes. If she was honest, she’d been too wrapped up in the covens and practicing her magic to see just how far they’d drifted apart. *But it’s only been three days since we left our old lives. Just a fraction of our time together. Surely it’s not too late to fix?*

“You know, we don’t have to join the Wild Alliance. There are other covens.”

Willow rounded on her, tail lashing. “Who says I want to be in a stupid coven? All we need is a home, and the reason we don’t have one is because *you* burned it down!”

The fissure in Luna’s heart split further, taking her breath away.

“Do you really think that?”

Willow’s whiskers drooped, but her eyes were fierce. “You heard what the toads said. They saw it in their visions. *Fire*. They saw where this all started.”

Luna was stunned. She had suspected as much herself, but she hadn’t wanted to believe it. She thought of the way the flames had seemed to come from all directions, how it had started so suddenly, with no warning, and engulfed the diner in seconds . . . But if it *had* been her doing, it wasn’t deliberate. She wasn’t to *blame*. Was she?

“If you think I’m so dangerous, why do you even stick around?” she snarled.

“Sometimes I ask myself the same question,” snapped Willow.

“Well, no one’s stopping you from leaving like Ragwort,” said Luna.

Willow sniffed haughtily and stared across the park. “No, I don’t suppose they are.”

And without a backward glance, she walked away.

Just as Willow disappeared into a patch of flowers near the park railings, a voice called, “Where’s your sister off to?”

Luna turned and saw Skitter scurrying out from the bushes, where Thorn waited. She licked a paw, trying to look nonchalant.

"Oh," she replied. "We decided to split up for a bit. Cover more ground."

"Any sign of Ragwort?"

"Afraid not," Luna grunted. "He's probably long gone." Then she remembered the lie she'd told to protect her sister. She flattened her ears in an expression she hoped looked apologetic. "Look, I don't know what I was thinking. I'm really sorry if it causes problems for the Alliance."

Skitter gnashed his teeth. "It'll probably be okay. We'll just own up and hope Nightshade's not too angry. I'm not sure Ragwort would have made a good Renegade in any case." He pushed down his whiskers with a paw. "You know, it's tonight that you'll visit the Conclave."

Luna bristled with shock. "What? How? We haven't even visited the Renegades yet."

"The Conclave sent word," said Skitter. "They think it's urgent. You can talk to them about the Renegades before you make your choice, but it's time to choose where you want to be." His words were accompanied by a hopeful twitch of his ears.

He still wants me to join them, thought Luna. *Even after Ragwort.*

She knew she should be flattered, but the rift with Willow still festered. Couldn't they see how all this *choosing* business had driven a wedge between the two sisters?

At the edge of the park, Willow had reappeared, grooming herself under a tree. Relief lightened Luna's paws. *So she hasn't gone for good. We can mend this.*

They'd said some awful things to each other and opened up wounds that would take time to heal. But they could get over it. They *would.*

Everything will be okay, Luna promised herself. *As long as we're together.*

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Chapter 8

Willow had never seen anything like it. The bridge that spanned the river was an enormous edifice, and for a little while at least, awe blew aside the turmoil of her thoughts.

But it soon returned.

The sisters had made their way this far in a stubborn, simmering silence, letting their guides Skitter and Thorn do all the talking. They seemed oblivious to the tension, but Willow felt it in every taut muscle of Luna's body. Was she too recalling every horrible thing they'd said to each other in the park?

Was I wrong to talk about the diner? Willow asked herself. *If Luna's powers burned it down, that was an accident. But it changed everything for us. Did I hurt Luna by saying so?*

Maybe. But she couldn't take it back now.

On the far side of the bridge, skyscrapers rose like towers of sparkling stars. It was nothing like the smaller buildings and parks of the part of the city on this side of the river, where Luna and Willow had lived their whole lives. Swivel had told them there wasn't a single tree left over there—the humans had felled them all. And though some bound animals lived there with their witches, it was mainly a place of mundane pets and scavenger animals like rats and pigeons. Good hunting, if you were willing to risk going deep into human territory, but it could be hard to channel the anima. It still flowed, but deep under the concrete sidewalks.

It was a cold evening. Moisture hung in the air, so even though it wasn't raining, by the time they reached the riverbank Willow was wet through. She'd almost refused to come when Skitter announced the Conclave

summons. But after her argument with Luna, she hadn't had the energy for another fight.

"We might as well hear what they have to say," she'd mewed.

Her sister hadn't replied, and Willow suspected she was anxious to hear the Conclave's opinions. *Well, that doesn't mean we have to do what they say. If Ragwort can leave, so can we. . . .*

"This is where we part," said Skitter. Thorn gave an anxious sniff and shook a cascade of droplets from his fur.

"Best of luck," he added.

Willow wondered what luck had to do with it. "Where are we supposed to go?" she asked.

Skitter pointed his snout toward the bridge. "Just follow the riverbank. You'll find the Conclave under the bridge."

"And will we see you again?" asked Luna.

What she means is, are we going to join the Wild Alliance, thought Willow. She felt a pang to hear the hope in her sister's voice.

Aren't I enough for you? she wanted to ask.

"That depends on your choice, and on the Conclave's judgment," said Skitter.

The sisters set off together toward the vast bridge that joined the two halves of the city. An awkward silence squirmed between them as they made their way, side by side. Willow tried to think of Ragwort instead. What was he doing at that moment? Had he made it back to his witch, or was he wandering the streets alone? Willow had grown fond of him in the brief time they'd known each other. He was kind and thoughtful, but she didn't think he was much of a survivor. It was difficult to imagine him managing on his own.

The silence clearly became too much for Luna, because she finally started to talk.

"I have no idea what to expect from this Conclave," she said in a bright tone. "To be honest, I don't even know which coven I'd choose. Not the Truthtellers, *that's* for sure. I like the Wild Alliance, but I think I'd prefer an adventure once in a while. But the Renegades didn't even invite us! Nightshade was pretty cool though, right?"

So it's like that, is it? thought Willow. *We'll just pretend today didn't happen.*

“I’m not sure I see the attraction,” she answered coolly. “The Renegades seem obsessed with freeing bound creatures, whether they want to be freed or not.”

Luna slowed her stride. “At least they have a sense of *purpose*,” she said with a flick of her ears.

“So what?” snapped Willow. “Ragwort told me he was happy before they tore him away. *He* had a purpose, but the Renegades didn’t bother to ask him.”

“He was a prisoner,” hissed Luna, “even if he didn’t realize it. Humans can’t be trusted—you *know* that. You’ve seen it with your own eyes, or have you forgotten?”

Willow stopped dead in her tracks, her whole body stiff as the past filled her mind.

She hadn’t understood at first what she was seeing. She had thought her mother might be asleep in the man’s arms, but it had slowly, horribly, dawned on her that the limp drape of her body could only mean one thing.

She felt the same heaviness in her paws as she had then. Fear rooting her to the spot. He was supposed to be their protector. She’d seen him stroking her mother, and she’d felt his hands running softly across her own fur. Yet now those hands were covered in her mother’s blood.

“You think I forgot our mother’s murder?” She couldn’t even look at Luna. *She wants to get me back for what I said about the fire*.

Even so, it was a low blow.

She hurried ahead to hide her hurt, so quickly that Luna had to trot to catch up.

Before more could be said, they came upon the toad called Courage. He was waiting for them on a patch of ground washed over by the car headlights above. Each illumination made him look golden.

“This way, please,” Courage said.

They followed his slow progress underneath the bridge arches into the gloom. Willow’s nose twitched at the change in the air—like it did before a storm. She could feel something else was different besides the light. Anima. It was everywhere, making her pelt prickle.

Perhaps that was why the Conclave chose this place.

She glanced at her sister, wondering if Luna was sensing it too. From the way she was turning her head, nostrils flaring, Willow guessed she could.

The toad who'd led the proceedings at the abandoned mall—Endurance—was sitting on the riverbank with three other toad companions. Courage joined them, and after a few croaks, Endurance turned to face the sisters. Her brown skin was covered in bumps, her face deeply wrinkled. She reminded Willow of the toad-god mural in the underground lair of the Truthtellers.

"Welcome to the Conclave," warbled Endurance. "Come closer, let me anoint you both with flowing water."

Neither Luna nor Willow moved.

"She doesn't bite," said the smallest of the toads—a male with a sickly green hide.

Willow went first, closely followed by her sister.

"Bow your heads," said Endurance.

Willow obeyed, lowering her head until her nose was almost touching the water where Endurance squatted. From the corner of her eye, she saw the old toad lift a foot and place it gently against her cheek.

"With this water, I purify you in the presence of the Conclave," intoned the toad.

It was the lightest touch, but a wave of anima swept through Willow, to the tip of every strand of fur. The congregated toads all warbled as one.

Willow backed away, nerves still tingling, and watched Endurance perform the same ritual with Luna.

"Very good," said Endurance. "Now, do you both consent to share your truth with the Conclave?"

Willow frowned, taken aback. No one in the Wild Alliance had told them what to expect during the visit. "Our *truth*?" she meowed.

"The anima will open your hearts to us," croaked an orange toad. "We will see your past, your present, and even perhaps your future. From our visions, we will decide whether you are fit to join a coven."

Willow balked, and even her sister looked unsettled. Did it mean the toads would see *everything* they'd done and said since the fire? Would they learn the truth of her conversations with Ragwort and how she really felt about the bound?

"I'm ready," purred Luna.

Willow wanted to back away, but how would it make her look? Cowardly, maybe even suspicious.

There's no turning back.

“Me too,” she mumbled.

The toads began to shift, forming into a semicircle in front of them.

“Approach,” said Endurance. “Take your place.”

Willow and her sister edged nearer to the toads, closing the circle with their bodies. The anima had become thick and almost intoxicating. Under the gaze of the toads, small as they were, Willow felt tiny.

“We have been awaiting you for some time,” said Endurance. “This will be . . . interesting.”

Willow shared a look with her sister. Maybe it was the weirdness of the whole scenario, or the power of the anima that swirled around them, but for a few seconds at least, gripped in the moment, all their conflict became insignificant.

“Closer, please,” said Endurance. “And close your eyes.”

Willow pressed nearer, lying on her belly, her whiskers brushing Luna on one side and the orange toad on the other. She was conscious only of the sound of their individual breaths, which slowly began to synchronize into one rhythm. And with each inhalation, the power of the anima grew. The chaotic swirls became a steady swell, rising and falling in time with their breathing, higher and higher, until she lost touch with the cool riverbank and felt cushioned on the air. She resisted the urge to look and see if she was actually floating. She knew that to do so would likely break the spell and sever the bonds that linked the Conclave, herself, and her sister.

“Good . . . good,” said Endurance, though the voice seemed to come from within Willow, rather than from outside. “Now . . . Open your eyes!”

Willow obeyed and gasped. For though they were still on the ground, in the middle of their circle a glowing ball of light, like a miniature sun, was spinning. Silver reflections shone back from the eyes of each of the toads that held the orb in their sight, transfixed. Nor could Willow look away.

In the center of the glowing ball images appeared, some passing swiftly, others settling for longer. She saw her past. Herself and Luna as kittens, nuzzled against their mother’s belly fur. She saw them playing together in the house of the human without a care in the world. And with the images came rushing emotions. Of happiness, of contentment, of love.

Yet even as the memories appeared, dread began to grow in the back of her mind. Because she knew what was coming. She wanted to stop it, to look away, but she couldn’t tear her eyes from the light.

And when it came, the man with her mother's broken body, she heard Luna let out a terrified wail. Or maybe the cry was her own.

The moment passed. The flashes were speeding up like an unstoppable flood. She saw their flight from the human home—the days of grief and desperate survival, the despair, then the first glimmer of hope when they'd found the diner. The peaceful days. Learning to play again, reveling in their first successful hunts. Becoming *sisters* instead of just orphans. To be back there, even in memory, left her brimming with joy.

But it had to end. Time moved on. Next came the fire, their flight to the park, the Alliance, the covens, Ragwort, the fight . . .

. . . until suddenly they were looking at themselves from above.

Five toads and two cats, huddled together and bathed in magical light.

And then, that too vanished, and all Willow saw was a tree of drooping branches, leaning slightly on the bank of a river that flowed not with water, but a sort of mist. And in the sky above, a claw's breadth above the topmost leaves, a full and golden moon. It was a peaceful scene, but only for a moment.

The ground began to shake, whether in the vision or the real world it was hard to tell. Willow's claws instinctively gripped the earth for balance, and the tree's roots in turn grasped the earth. In the shaking branches, the moon's rich gold became a sickly yellow. Leaves began to wither and fall into the misty current, where they were carried away, until the branches were bare and skeletal and dripping with sap, as though poison was seeping from the bark. Then the moon began to fall, its light fading as it gave up the fight to remain in the sky. It tumbled through the dead branches and descended into the river too. As the last of its light vanished, darkness swallowed the vision.

Willow's head was reeling, her legs unsteady. The circle had broken, and the orange toad lay on its back, limbs flailing until it righted itself. Endurance was panting for air. Poor Luna had her head between her paws.

"What was that?" Willow managed to ask.

"It's really them," Courage warbled, his throat sac pulsing quickly. "Tree and Moon. Willow and Luna."

"Was that our future?" mewed Luna. She was trembling still from the awful visions. "Was that *us*?"

Endurance's grave expression was enough to tell Willow that the vision was far from a promising one.

The anima was slowly leaving her body, and she shivered.

"Give us a moment, if you will," croaked Endurance.

The toads gathered into a huddle, their heads almost touching.

"Are you all right?" Willow asked her sister.

Luna took a deep breath. "I think so. That was horrible!"

Willow bobbed her head in agreement.

Now Endurance rounded to face them again.

"Was it supposed to be like that?" asked Willow.

Endurance licked her lips. "Willow and Luna, we have seen your truth, and what it brings. There is room for only one."

"One what?" asked Luna.

Endurance had regained her composure now. "For one sister among the covens. One of you belongs, the other does not. While you are together, only misery awaits. You *must* separate for your own good."

The words took a while to sink in, but when they did, Willow could only snort.

"Separate? You must be joking."

"Does she look like she's joking?" snapped one of the other toads. "Did you not see in the anima what your future holds? You will both die, and your deaths will have effects well beyond your own small existence."

"Fortitude is correct," said Endurance. "I know this is a hard message to hear, but your future lies apart for the benefit of all attuned."

"But we're sisters," hissed Willow angrily. "You can't split us up!"

The staring eyes of the toads were utterly impassive.

Willow held their gaze. "You're crazy—all of you. This whole Conclave thing is ridiculous. We don't have to listen to you. We don't need you. We're not leaving each other because a bunch of toads say it's a good idea." She looked at her sister. "Right, Luna?"

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Chapter 9

“Right, Luna?”

The toads shifted their weight as one, their eyes drilling into Luna. But it was Willow’s desperate stare that touched her heart. In her sister’s eyes, she saw shifting emotions. Bewilderment, then fear.

What am I supposed to say?

She half wondered if this was some sort of test—a sick joke to see how they would respond. The alternative—that the Conclave were serious—was impossible to reckon with.

“No,” she meowed.

“No *what*?” asked Courage.

“You can’t split us up.”

Her sister gave a hiss of relief.

“*We* are not doing anything of the sort,” croaked Endurance. “We are giving you a choice. You are both welcome to leave—but only one of you may stay.”

“Can’t . . . can’t you check the visions again?” Luna asked.

The smallest toad, whose body shone with patches of iridescent green, slapped the ground with a foot. “Our visions have been clear for months. You two are cursed.”

“Fortitude . . . ,” scolded Endurance. “That’s unnecessary.”

But Fortitude plopped forward. “We cannot ignore the warnings, Mother. This will affect all of us. All of the attuned. There will be dire consequences if we let them both remain. . . .”

Endurance sighed. “I’m afraid, Willow and Luna, that he is right. You must choose now.”

“Let’s go,” said Willow with a haughty whip of her tail. She turned to leave.

Luna’s paws were slower to move. She wanted to argue their case more—to make the Conclave understand the impossibility of what they were asking. Clearly toad siblings didn’t share the same affection as cats. But she didn’t know what to say. How could she explain her relationship with Willow? How could she make them feel the same love? Despite the rift of the last few days, it was still just the two of them against the world.

“It’s not fair,” she said. “We’ve done nothing wrong. We didn’t ask for this.”

She could hear how pathetic she sounded and hated herself for it.

“They just want your magic, Luna,” mewed Willow. “But you don’t owe them anything. We didn’t need them before, and we don’t need them now. We can use our magic for ourselves.”

The ridges over Endurance’s eyes rose a fraction. “We heard you were unable to use the anima.”

“Who told you that?” snapped Willow. “See, Luna, they’ve been spying on us. We can’t trust them.”

“We follow the fates of all the covens,” said Endurance coldly. “For their own good. Luna, your sister is right about one thing. Your magic will be a great boon. But know this—if you decide to forge your own path in the city, the human witches will sense your presence. They will hunt you down and try to bind you. And we will not be able to protect you.”

“And you know what humans are capable of,” added Fortitude. “We saw it too.”

“You’re manipulating her!” hissed Willow.

“We are giving her the facts,” said Endurance. “An animal of Luna’s power will always be at risk.”

“As will anyone at her side,” muttered Courage.

Luna knew they were right. What if she and her sister *were* captured by witches? They’d likely be separated and might never see each other again.

“Lu,” said her sister. “Are you coming, or not?”

“I just need to *think*!” Luna muttered.

There has to be another way. We can’t just leave all this behind.

“You really don’t,” snapped Willow. “I’m your sister.”

Couldn’t Willow see that it wasn’t that simple? Being with the attuned animals, learning about magic—a new horizon had opened before them,

wide and wonderful, and yet to be explored.

We can't turn our back on that, can we?

The light seemed to dim in her sister's gaze.

"I see," Willow mewed coldly.

With a swish of her tail, her sister turned and ran.

"Wait!" called Luna.

But Willow didn't break her stride.

"It seems your sibling has chosen," said Endurance.

Luna fought down the urge to issue a sharp reply, and set off after Willow. She saw her sister's dark shape coming out from under the bridge and climbing the steep bank like a slinking shadow. She shouted after her. "Willow, come back, let's just talk!"

Her sister had reached the top and glanced at Luna, her eyes blazing.

"There's nothing to talk about! You made it clear what *you* want."

She turned and disappeared, heading toward the road. It had been bad enough in the park watching her go. This time it felt permanent.

Luna sprang after her, scampering through the scrubby grass. The rain was coming down harder, peppering her back. She called out her sister's name, but the noise of the traffic on the road drowned her out.

At the top of the bank, she saw Willow pounce over a concrete barrier at the roadside. Her gut tightened with worry. *Where is she going?*

She followed, hopping onto the barrier too, just as a car horn blared out. Willow was crossing the road in jerking bursts, her gray fur lit up by the passing headlights.

"Please, stop!" cried Luna.

She'll get herself killed!

Relief flooded her as Willow made it to the sidewalk on the far side. She began to run toward the other side of the bridge and the soaring skyscrapers of the city.

On her side of the road, Luna kept pace, glimpsing Willow between the streaming cars. The noise was so overwhelming it was useless to shout. Willow didn't even glance back. She seemed determined to get away.

She didn't even give me a chance to explain. She just left me!

A car's wheels skidded through a puddle, throwing up a wave of filthy rainwater that almost knocked Luna off her paws. She stood for a moment in shock, dripping. When she peered across the lanes of traffic, she couldn't see her sister at all.

I have to get to the other side. . . .

But the cars were relentless—a stream of growling metal beasts. Luna paused on the curbside, looking for a gap, then darted into the flow. She made it halfway, only for one vehicle to come faster than the others. She sprinted, feeling it pass close to her tail, but found herself directly in the path of a truck, monstrously tall, its lights blinding. There was no time to spring either way. Luna pressed her body to the black surface and clamped her eyes shut.

The truck roared overhead, the currents of air whipping her fur, threatening to buffet her into the path of the traffic. She gripped the road with her extended claws and waited for it to pass. And as soon as she felt the air still, she raced to the safety of the far side. Her heart was knocking at her ribs.

Willow, though, was nowhere to be seen.

This part of the city was busier than anywhere Luna had ventured before. Even after dark, the sidewalks were filled with humans, and cars of every shape and size stretched nose to tail, beeping their horns and choking the air with smoke. Luna searched the alleyways, figuring that Willow's natural instinct would be to lay low and avoid the human thoroughfares. She saw rats, their eyes glittering in the gloom, but her attempts to talk to them were fruitless. Those that didn't scurry away at her approach stared back mutely with the fear of mundane prey.

With each dead end, Luna's hopes dwindled. The city was vast. The smells—of the cars, food, humans, the stinking drains running under paw—all mingled to make tracing Willow by scent alone a hopeless task. As she ventured farther into the tangle of streets, the buildings seemed to loom larger, closing in around her.

Maybe she'll head back to the bridge, Luna reasoned. *If* I'm *scared here, Willow will be terrified.*

But Willow might not have been able to find her way back to the bridge, even if she wanted to. Luna realized she didn't know exactly in which direction the river lay herself.

"You've done all you can," said a voice to her left.

Luna's spine arched. She turned to see Endurance the toad sitting on the saddle of a battered bicycle with a buckled front wheel. She appeared

composed and unworried, her flanks pulsing with slow and steady breaths.

"How did you get . . . ?" began Luna. "Oh, never mind."

Clearly the toad possessed great magic if she could transport herself such a distance.

"This side of the bridge is dangerous for our kind," croaked the old toad. She inflated her throat sac and peered around. "Too many humans. Too many buildings. The anima cannot flow freely, and in turn it's harder to draw upon."

Luna closed her eyes for a few seconds, sensing the truth of Endurance's claims. The anima tasted thin, impure, as if corrupted by the city's other flavors.

"It's mostly the bound who live here," continued Endurance. "They're more practiced at drawing on the meager anima for their human witches. They look unfavorably on those of us who choose to remain unbound."

"I can't find her," Luna said, claws of desperation raking her insides.

"Your sister doesn't want to be found."

"She's angry," said Luna. "That's all. She'll come back when she calms down."

Endurance stared placidly. "It's more than anger, Luna. I think you've known for a while that you and your sister have different paths to follow."

"Because that's what your prophecy said?"

"Because that's what your heart is telling you," replied the toad. "Willow has made her choice. You must make yours."

But had Willow really made a choice, or had she just stormed off in anger? *Well, I won't let those words on the bridge be the last we say to each other.*

"You will forget about her, in time. It's better this way." Endurance spoke with maddening certainty. Luna's throat let out a growl.

"You don't know anything about us," she said.

"We foresaw you in our visions," said Endurance. "We have seen your past and the possibilities of your future."

"And *I'm* interested in what's happening *now*," growled Luna. "I'm grateful for everything you've done for us, and I do want to be part of a coven. But first I must find my sister, before . . . well, before anything happens to her."

Endurance was silent for a time, but eventually bobbed her head. "Very well, Luna. But in this the Conclave cannot help you. We have seen the

dangers you pose together, whether you accept our prophecy or not."

"Fine," said Luna. She turned to the streets, and the task ahead seemed more hopeless than ever. A cat could easily stay hidden here forever, especially if that was Willow's plan.

When she looked back to Endurance, the toad had vanished.

Somehow Luna found the bridge again and crossed back to the quieter side of the city. With every step, her heartache deepened. She was leaving Willow to dangers unknown, but if she was ever going to find her, she knew she couldn't do it alone. She needed help.

Once past the hazards of the traffic she broke into a loping run, following the route by which Skitter had led them from the Wild Alliance territory. She arrived at the stream, panting, and hopped the stones to open the magical gateway to the playground. A panicked barking started up almost at once.

"Who goes . . . Oh, it's you!" said Thorn, uncurling his body from his sentry post. He looked past her. "Er . . . where's Willow?"

The other animals stirred at the sound, emerging from their nests and sleeping spots.

"What's all the bother?" muttered Skitter, rubbing his snout with a raggedy claw.

Luna meowed loudly. "My sister's missing in the city. I need your help to find her."

Mousebane floated down from the sky and landed right in front of her. "Courage isn't back yet. What happened with the Conclave?"

"That's not important," insisted Luna. "We need a search party."

"First, tell us *why* she's missing," hooted the leader of the Wild Alliance. "You went together. Was she . . . taken?"

"No," said Luna. She forced herself to draw a deep breath. How could she explain the visions? It wouldn't make sense. And every moment spent talking was time that could be used finding her sister.

"We had an argument and Willow left," she meowed. "She thought I didn't want to be with her anymore, that I wanted to stay with the attuned."

"And do you?" grunted Thorn.

"Well, yes. But that doesn't mean I want us to separate."

“It’s perfectly normal for cats to split up with their siblings as they grow older, as I understand it,” said Swivel. He was perched above, his head tucked into his neck.

“Not me and Willow,” said Luna. “She wouldn’t want to be on her own.”

“And yet,” said Mousebane, “she left.”

“From what I’ve seen, she might even want to be bound to a human,” added Skitter. “Not that I was snooping, but she and Ragwort certainly discussed the idea.”

“I daresay it suits *some* animals,” muttered Swivel.

“Stop, please!” meowed Luna. Her sister becoming the prisoner of a human was almost the worst of any outcome she could imagine.

Silence followed. The creatures of the Wild Alliance shared uncertain glances. Luna held her breath. They’d treated her so kindly until now. Surely they wouldn’t refuse her.

Mousebane shuffled his wings. “If an attuned creature values human companionship, that’s their business. It’s not a prospect we welcome, but who are we to interfere?”

“That’s not how you felt when Ragwort ran off.”

“That was different,” the owl replied. “He had been saved by the Renegades, and we felt an obligation to keep him safe. We aren’t sure he can survive on his own. Your sister is bound to no one, and she seems resourceful enough to take care of herself.”

“So you won’t help?”

“Help who?” asked Mousebane. “Would we be helping your sister by hunting her down against her will?”

Luna could see the truth in his words and it made her heart plunge.

“She’s just . . . confused,” she mewed. “She doesn’t understand what being bound will mean. That she won’t see me again.” She threw imploring looks around the Wild Alliance. “I’m begging you. . . .”

Mousebane and Swivel shared a long stare.

“I see,” said the owl leader. “But what you ask is not without risk. In the city, magic is more challenging, and our enemies will find us more easily.”

This brought mutters of agreement from the gathering.

“I *know* that,” said Luna. “And I’d be forever grateful. I’d owe you everything.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And I suppose we might consider taking on that risk to help *a member of our own coven. . . .*”

The huge owl left the words hanging. Both eyes, blind and seeing, fixed on Luna's. She caught his meaning perfectly.

They might *help me find Willow, but only if I join the Wild Alliance.*

Disgust rippled across her fur. "You're blackmailing me," she hissed. "And you're not even promising to help!"

Dawn and Dusk gasped. Skitter's head jerked up. But Mousebane only clacked his beak lightly.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but you've had long enough to decide. We've welcomed you and your sister. We've hunted together. We've taught you to harness the anima—"

"And now you want payback," snarled Luna. "You want my powers, and you'd use my sister's life to buy them."

Thorn swallowed audibly. "I'm sure that's not what Mousebane means."

"It's exactly what he means," said Luna, tail lashing angrily. "A moment ago, you seemed to think you shouldn't interfere, but now you've changed your mind. Well, here's my answer." She turned to each of them as she spat out the words. "I'm done with the Wild Alliance. *All* of you. I'm going to find *real* friends who do what's right."

"Don't make any rash decisions," said Skitter. "You might regret it."

"Ha!" said Luna. "The only thing I regret is not seeing through you before now."

She turned her back on them, the fire of anima swirling in her belly. She resisted the urge to send a burst of flame into the night.

"Where are you going?" whined Thorn.

Luna didn't answer as she strode purposefully toward the stream's edge. Her paws were cold with apprehension, but it seemed to her that there was only one choice she could make. The Wild Alliance didn't really care if Willow was captured by humans. The Truthtellers were creepy, and, if Willow did become bound, they'd hate her on principle.

That left only one choice. She needed a coven who weren't afraid to fight for the freedom of attuned animals across the city. Even if she didn't know them at all, she had seen that they had rescued a bound animal—although Ragwort hadn't appreciated the chance he'd been given. She knew they would help.

She needed the Renegades.

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Chapter 10

Perched on a roof two stories high, with the darkness crowding her, Willow spied on her sister and Endurance talking in the alleyway. She couldn't hear their words, but Luna's actions said it all when she turned away, back toward the bridge. Endurance had clearly convinced her that it was best to leave Willow in the city.

So that's it. She's abandoning me. She's going back to those cowards in the Wild Alliance. Willow watched her sister's pale form round a corner and disappear out of sight before looking back to Endurance. But the toad had skulked off too.

How the mean old toad had managed to find them was anyone's guess. Some sort of sneaky toad magic, no doubt. Willow had struggled to summon her shadow magic at first, but up here, away from the streets, it had been easier. The air tasted cleaner, and the anima flowed more freely.

She slunk glumly down a fire escape and back to street level, dropping her shadow-pelt along the way. Sure, she had used her magic to conceal herself, but she was still surprised at how quickly Luna had given up the search. All it had taken was the warblings of the Conclave, and suddenly her sister believed their fates lay along diverging paths.

I should have seen it coming. Ever since she discovered her magic, she's been a different cat.

Maybe it was for the best. So much had changed, with revelation after revelation. It probably shouldn't have come as a surprise that they wanted different things.

And Willow was hardly helpless. No doubt there'd be corners of this vast city where she could make a home like the one they'd shared at the diner.

Then, if Luna ever tired of the Wild Alliance, she could welcome her sister back, and all the talk of Conclaves and prophecy would be a thing of the past.

The rain had stopped, she realized, as if the sky was matching her lightening mood.

Yet Willow couldn't *completely* forget the mysterious visions under the bridge: the moon and the tree. Luna and Willow. And they *had* separated, hadn't they? As Endurance said they must.

It was undeniable that the words of the toads were already coming true.

Willow swallowed down the uneasy feeling rising from her stomach. Just because it looked like fate, that didn't mean it was.

It had been her choice, and Luna's, to go their separate ways.

And she at least was happy to live with her decision.

She had no idea which way to go. Humans swarmed the sidewalks, spilling out of buildings that glared with bright light. Finding a peaceful place to rest looked impossible. But as she rounded a corner, she saw in the distance the vast buildings visible from the river bridge. *Skyscrapers*, Ragwort had called them. The sort of place he lived in with his witch, Leanne. There were several, rising like giant trees into the night sky. Perhaps there she would have a chance of bumping into him or other attuned animals who might know where he lived.

Willow set off, determined not to let her fear of the city get the better of her. She imagined her sister looking on and lengthened her stride. *I made this choice. I'll show her what I'm made of.*

Her confidence lasted a couple of blocks before a shout made her twist around. A human man on a bike was heading right for her and she scurried out of the way. That sent her colliding with a group spilling from a building that seemed to shake with loud, thudding music. She found herself tangled with their legs as they laughed and hollered. One of them fell over, and she only just managed to avoid being crushed. She broke into a desperate run, sprinting across a road between the wheels of stationary traffic. Several humans cried out, perhaps at her, but she didn't stop to check. She just wanted to get away from them all.

Yet each corner brought streets just as packed. She tried to hide behind a large planter, where trash had collected, but a woman eating something

from a paper bag spotted her. She approached slowly and stooped down, her mouth making terrifying sounds. Pressed back, with nowhere to run, Willow hissed and lashed out her claws. The woman backed off, her food dropping to the ground. She shouted something, and Willow used the opportunity to bolt off between her legs.

Afterward, the smell of the food lingered in her nostrils and made her stomach growl.

Willow realized she'd hadn't seen much prey since she crossed the bridge. There were pigeons, but they were perched higher up, darting to the ground to peck at scraps in the road, or staying closer to the humans than Willow dared.

She found herself at last in a narrow street without much traffic and smelled human cooking drifting on a misty smoke. She let her paws carry her to the entranceway of an alley. The sound of muffled human voices reached her ears, but they were distant enough not to be threatening. The scent of food was far more intense, and she crept into the passage. There were dumpsters, of the sort that had sat below their old diner, and Willow felt sure that was where the smells were coming from.

Her whiskers alert to danger, she scrambled onto the rim of the first dumpster. *Food!*

There were all kinds of scraps, falling from plastic wrappers, or wrapped up in bags. Clinging with her back paws, she leaned in and ate. The food was slimy and warm and tasted unlike anything she was used to. It made her mouth tingle and burn. But she forced it down. There was something nicer in there, too—meat of some kind in a small tray. She gripped it in her teeth and pulled it free. It spilled over the edge of the dumpster onto the ground below—a bone still covered in plenty of flesh. She hopped down, held it steady with her forepaws, and began to tear at the meal.

Only then did she hear the scratch of claws. She looked up to see black and gray faces appear from the shadows, crowding on all sides. Fluffy ringed tails, held erect on high alert, swayed with menace.

Raccoons.

She and Luna had encountered the odd one in the past or watched them scurrying from the windows at the diner. They tended to move alone or in pairs, but she counted at least eight now. They were all at least her size and looking at the bone she clutched.

“It’s mine,” she said, trying to sound confident. “There’s plenty more food in there.”

The raccoons gave no indication that they understood, and she guessed they were mundane. Two of them pressed closer, so Willow showed her fangs and hissed.

They stopped in their tracks, but only for a moment. Willow felt a sharp pain in her hind leg and spun around. She lashed a paw across her attacker’s cheek, which knocked it sideways.

But the others saw their chance and rushed her. With a screech, Willow scythed her paws in wide arcs to ward them off, but they were too many. She found herself rolled over, teeth and claws attacking from all sides. She bit back, tasting blood and fur in a ball of tangled bodies, cruel eyes, and wrinkled snouts. Their stink made her head spin.

She wanted to use her magic, to summon the anima, but she couldn’t find the focus. It was all she could do to fend off each new bite or blow. *They’re going to kill me!* she thought. *If only Luna were here. If only I hadn’t been so rash. . . .*

Just as she thought it, there came a loud bang followed by a human voice, and the pressure across her limbs vanished. The raccoons scurried away, disappearing into the shadows. One of them, she noticed, had taken the bone.

The human spoke again—an angry shout—and Willow saw a man in the light of a doorway. He was dressed in white and he held a long stick with bristles at one end. He looked up and down the alley, then walked to the dumpster and pulled a lid over it. Then he spotted her.

Pains shot across Willow’s body as she struggled to stand. As well as the various cuts across her legs, her tail felt funny and her head swam with dizziness. For a moment, as the man approached, she saw two of him. She blinked and he became a single figure once more. He was talking to her gently, but the sounds made no sense. He still held the bristly stick, and she feared he meant to strike her.

Backing away, staggering a little, she kept her distance, keeping him in her view. His soft tone reminded her of the man who’d killed her mother. She hissed and he seemed to get the message. When another voice called from inside the building, he retreated through the doorway.

Almost as soon as he did, Willow saw the shadows moving as the raccoons came out from hiding. Knowing she wouldn’t get another chance,

she summoned her last reserves of strength and ran.

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Chapter 11

The sun hadn't yet come up, but darkness was beginning to retreat from the upper reaches of the sky. Luna was losing hope of ever finding the Renegades' lair. All she'd had to go on was Ragwort's loose description of a junkyard beside a railway bridge and the vague direction in which she had seen the black raven Coalclaw fly from the meeting of the covens at the mall.

She'd walked for hours on sore paws, following the river and resting only for a short nap under the shelter of a bench. Toward dawn she had reached what seemed to be a deserted wasteland of huge warehouses and run-down garages. After the busy sidewalks of the city downtown, it was a relief to be far away from the human crowds. The few humans she did see here were driving huge vehicles, which shook the roads and belched smoke in their wake. It was as far from the parkland of the Wild Alliance as she could imagine. No trees, no greenery of any sort, other than the most meager tufts of grass forcing themselves through the cracks in the asphalt.

It was just as the golden disc of the sun peeked above the horizon, revealing a perfectly clear sky, that she heard the distant rattle of a train. Her ears swiveled to find the source of the sound. Rounding a bend, and above the low buildings, there, at last, she saw it—a bridge! A train nosed across it like a giant snake gliding across the sky.

That has to be it!

The aches fell away, and she quickened her steps.

As she came closer to the bridge, her anxiety grew. Though she couldn't see any creatures on guard, the silence was unnerving. Were they watching her as she approached? She wished her sister was at her side, scouting

ahead for danger. Willow had always been the better stalker—which made sense, she realized, given her magical abilities.

But it's just me, thought Luna. *I'll have to get used to that, for now. . . .*

She wondered what Willow was doing. Had she found somewhere to shelter from the rain? Was she hungry? Surely Luna would have sensed if something bad had happened to Willow, but maybe that was just wishful thinking. She pushed the empty feeling away and focused on the bridge.

This is for my sister. I'll find the Renegades, and together we'll find her.

She reached a metal-link fence topped with wire adorned with short metal spikes. On the other side were the remains of hundreds of human machines, stacked on top of one another, or leaning at precarious angles. They reminded Luna of skeletons, and she shuddered.

It wasn't hard to find a way in—she picked up the scent of dog and followed it to where a section of wire had been ripped open at the bottom. She squeezed under and entered the lot. Puddles of oil shone in myriad colors alongside pieces of twisted, rusting metal, circular objects, and broken glass. It was far from welcoming.

"Hello?" she called. "Is anyone here?"

There was no answer.

She pressed on, treading lightly, but the animal smells became confused, leading into the wreckage—as if whoever lived here had laid numerous false trails.

"Where are you hiding?" she muttered.

Then her eyes alighted on a blue car, and she remembered Ragwort's description of such a vehicle. It didn't look special, or magical, in any way, but it stood apart from the others. It appeared to have caught on fire at some point in the past, because inside were bare metal bones and the roof had buckled inward. A door hung off like a loose tooth about to fall, and the only window left was the one at the front.

This must be the one Ragwort told us about!

She leaped onto the hood. Here came the next problem—could she remember the spell?

She examined the patterns marked on the glass, trying to decipher their meaning. Ragwort had shown them how to do it, at least roughly, but she'd barely been listening. She could easily spend days guessing at the correct method, scratching hopelessly until her claws were blunt.

But an odd warmth was gathering under her paws. She was quite sure it wasn't just the morning sun heating the rusting metal.

It's anima!

The energy came in soft waves, lapping at her fur. She summoned it to her like Thorn and Skitter had demonstrated and gathered it higher and higher until it seemed to fill her. She lifted a paw and slid out her claws. Without thinking, she moved them across the glass, first one way, then the other, in a smooth arc. Finally, with a slash, she made a horizontal score.

Then everything changed.

It started with a creak and a clank, and the neighboring pile of junk shifted, as if some huge creature were stirring beneath. Luna cringed, ready to run for safety. But no monster emerged. Instead, the debris parted in the center, the heaps of rusting metal reshaping themselves, forming a path deeper into the junkyard.

"No way . . . ," Luna breathed.

She hopped down, the anima still swirling around her. Placing each paw with care, she entered the passageway.

She'd only taken a few steps when she heard a hiss at her back. From behind a circular object, a narrow furry snout appeared, brown with a white streak across its forehead.

A weasel. It watched her for a moment with eyes like polished black pebbles. Luna felt the anima ripple with danger, and a shard of glass rose from the ground and hovered in the air.

"Hey, wait!" she mewed.

The weasel swished a forepaw, and the glass flew toward her. Luna rolled sideways as it cut past.

"Stop!" she shouted.

The weasel flung out another paw. Now a length of pipe shot from the debris. Luna let the anima flow through her and sent a blast of fire, melting the projectile midair. A pall of smoke hung between them.

"Intruders die!" squeaked the weasel.

He flailed both forelimbs, and several more projectiles whistled through the air. Luna summoned more anima to meet each missile, and flames incinerated them before they could reach her. There was clearly no point reasoning with her attacker, so she turned and ran deeper into the Renegade lair.

Coming up the passageway toward her was a Siamese cat. Her eyes, blue as a summer sky, widened suddenly. In the same moment, dust kicked up from the ground, and a gust drove Luna backward. She summoned her fire and sent it toward the cat, but the flames blew back as the gust became a raging gale, extinguishing the fire and knocking her off her paws. She rolled, helpless, landing hard against the side of a car.

The Siamese approached, eyes still fixed on Luna. The wind kept her pinned to the car, so hard she struggled even to draw a breath.

"I'm Luna," she managed to choke out. "I . . . I want to join your coven!"

The cat swished her tail, and her stare relaxed. At once, the wind died, and Luna sagged to the ground. The weasel slithered from his spot among the wrecks and joined the Siamese. As Luna sucked in deep breaths, they muttered to each other. Then the cat spoke.

"Your fire magic is impressive," she said, "but next time we won't go easy on you. Let's see what Nightshade has to say."

"Follow," added the weasel.

Luna, still shaken from the impact with the car, did what she was told. The two creatures flanked her, watching carefully, as they made their way to a circular clearing amid the looming stacks of ancient cars and human detritus. As she examined them more closely, she saw the scrap metal wasn't arranged entirely haphazardly. There were alcoves and hollows at various levels, some lined with old cushions or rubber matting to form dens and nests that were protected from the elements.

Nightshade, the black dog she had seen at the mall, was perched atop a huge motorcycle with a torn leather seat. A bird squawk from above drew Luna's eyes, and Coalclaw the raven swept down and alighted on one of the wide handlebars.

"What are *you* doing here?" she cawed.

It wasn't quite the welcome Luna had hoped for.

"She *said* she wants to join us," purred the Siamese.

"We assumed you were with the Wild Alliance," growled Nightshade.

Luna smarted but kept herself in check. She needed the Renegades on her side. "I was," she meowed, "but not anymore. I had a problem, and when it came down to it, they were too cowardly to help." It wasn't quite the truth, but it was close enough. "You, on the other hand—"

"If you want to join us," interrupted Nightshade, "we need to see what you can do."

Very well. . . .

Luna drew a breath of anima and sent two spurts of fire across either side of the motorbike. Coalclaw flinched and flapped, but Nightshade barely moved.

"And?" he said.

Luna felt deflated. "I've only just learned about my magic," she said. "I think with more practice, I—"

"And why exactly do you want to join *us*?" asked Nightshade. "Why not the Truthtellers, or one of the other covens?"

"We all have powerful magic," added Coalclaw.

Luna thought about lying. She could flatter them, maybe. Or make up some other excuse. But what would be the point? Her sister was out there alone. There wasn't time to waste.

"I need your help," she mewed. "My sister is lost on the other side of the river, and I can't get her back on my own."

"Sounds like none of our business," hissed the weasel. "Some animals like the city, though I can't see why."

"I agree, Kite," replied Nightshade. "Over the bridge is a dangerous place at the best of times."

The Siamese cat was licking her paw dismissively, and Luna could sense she was losing them. Not that it was hard to see why. Willow meant nothing to them at all.

She had to think fast to get them back on her side.

"I'm worried . . . ," she mewed. "She's not normally like this. I think . . . I think it might have something to do with her magic. She can suddenly do incredible things with the anima. What if she's taken by a witch, and bound like Ragwort was?"

Nightshade's ears pricked up at that.

"We heard about Ragwort," squawked Coalclaw. "Apparently the Wild Alliance *lost* him."

"Typical," muttered the Siamese.

"And does this sister of yours have powerful magic?" asked Nightshade, cocking his head.

"Very," Luna quickly replied. "She can make herself invisible. She can hide other animals, too. But after befriending Ragwort, it seemed she had been considering living with humans. . . ."

Coalclaw clacked her beak. “Such powers could be misused by a human witch,” she said. “They’d capture her and bind her if they could. If we can find her before a witch does, we could keep her from becoming a witch’s prisoner.”

Nightshade bobbed his head. “Very well,” he said. “Luna, we will help you. But after we find Willow, we will not force her to stay with us, or with you, if she chooses to leave. We will only help to protect her from being captured.”

“Oh, thank you!” purred Luna. *Once I talk to Willow properly, she won’t want to leave me.* “You won’t regret it, I . . .”

Nightshade lifted the stub of his left foreleg to stop her. “Now, in normal circumstances there would be a trial for any new recruit to join the Renegades, but we will forgo it on this occasion. On one condition.”

Luna’s heart lifted. With these creatures at her side, finding Willow just became a hundred times easier. “Yes. Anything!”

“If we do this for you and your sister,” said Nightshade, “you must swear allegiance to the Renegades.”

It was the same deal as the Wild Alliance had offered her, but at least Nightshade had come right out and said it. And Luna had a lot more faith in the abilities of the Renegades than she did the ragtag Alliance. This was what they did all the time, wasn’t it—going into enemy territory to rescue vulnerable animals?

But I don’t know them at all, she reminded herself. *And I don’t know what they would* really *want from me. . . .*

“Do you want our help or not?” asked Kite.

Luna’s lips parted. “I do. I really do. And I want to join you. I just need to understand what that means.”

Nightshade stared directly at her. “It means you obey me without question. That you put the well-being of the coven above all other considerations. It means loyalty from now until the day the breath leaves your body.”

It wasn’t quite what Luna had been expecting. Was it like this with all covens—a promise for life? *That sounds a lot like being bound. . . .*

“Look,” she mewed, “I have so much respect for you, and for your ways, but I can’t make a promise like that. I think for myself, and I’d be deceiving you if I swore an oath that said otherwise.”

Nightshade continued to regard her closely, looking distinctly unimpressed, and seemed to be waiting for her to continue. Maybe to give in and change her mind. But Luna said nothing and just stared back.

"If that's your final answer," said the three-legged dog, "you know the way out."

What else was there to say? Luna turned and began to walk away, her shoulders heavy. Would the Truthtellers help her, or would they make the same demand? Something told her they might ask even more of her, given Sunfire's burning intensity. And the prospect of living in that underground lair made her shudder.

Yet, other than that, what were the options? Skitter had mentioned other covens, but how would she even find them? Plus, word might already have spread from the Conclave about their visions and warnings. If that was the case, no coven would even entertain her.

I've let Willow down. . . . .

She had almost emerged from the lair when she heard Nightshade bark.

"Wait, Luna!"

She retraced her paw steps. He had dismounted the motorbike saddle and was standing in front of the others. His face wore an expression of wry amusement. "You passed the test," he said. "No true Renegade would ever swear such an oath. Our motto is freedom, above all."

Luna flicked her ear uncertainly. "Is this another trick?"

Nightshade laughed, and the others joined in. "No more tricks," he said. "Welcome to the Renegades."

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Chapter 12

Willow dipped her head into the trash can, nostrils twitching. There was food in here, but it smelled *awful*. She lowered her body in too and rummaged, turning over a cardboard container. A layer of furry mold covered the top, but Willow had learned to lower her standards as the days passed. She picked at the food, not bothering to chew for fear of tasting it.

Dusk was always the worst time for Willow. Not only because the humans would come flooding from their buildings and the streets would fill with their cars, but because it meant another night alone. No one to snuggle up alongside. No one to talk to at all.

Had she been too rash when she crossed the bridge and left Luna behind?

It had been ten days since the gathering with the Conclave. No, maybe eleven. They all blurred into one, and it was getting harder to suppress the regret that lurked beneath her self-pity. Fall was giving way to winter, the daylight fading earlier and quicker. The nights were colder too.

Her stomach recoiled, but she swallowed more of the rancid food.

I have to eat.

She had caught a glimpse of herself earlier that day in the glass wall of a skyscraper. At first she'd arched her back, thinking it was another cat entirely, but alarm was followed swiftly by the realization that she was looking at herself. Her eyes were hollow and dull, her ribs were showing through her fur. She could even see the bumps of her spine at the top of her tail.

Finding food was so tricky in the concrete hunting grounds. The rats were sharp-eyed, large, and swarmed in packs. The pigeons were survivors, quick to snatch crumbs, and quick to take flight at the tiniest alarm. The

humans threw away a lot of food, it was true, but each day more humans collected the trash in their giant trucks, meaning the window for scavenging was small. When she could eat at leisure, it tended to be from places not much visited by the humans, and the food had been left longer. A few days before, she'd made the mistake of eating something truly rotten, and it had left her heaving, her stomach in knots for most of the following day.

Soon it would be time to find a nest for the night. She shivered. There were the doorways of buildings, or spots under benches, but almost nowhere that the humans didn't go. She'd lost count of the number of times she'd woken to find one of them bearing down on her, and there'd been a couple of particularly horrible incidents she'd fled from. The first was an angry, shouting man throwing a bucket of cold water over her, and the second a woman with a metal loop on a long pole, trying to hook her neck. She'd had to lash out with her claws to escape.

Those warm, dreamy slumbers at the diner felt like an impossible memory, too cozy to be real. When she thought of them now, Willow wondered if Luna's fire magic had been there all along, emanating through her fur and keeping them warm. What Willow would have done to sleep beside her sister on these cold evenings.

Does she think about me at all? Or is she just relieved to be rid of her troublesome sister?

In the daylight hours there was no time for thinking, what with constant hunger gnawing at her insides and dangers lurking around every corner. Night was different. That was when the tumbles of memory would play over and over in her mind. Mostly she felt sorry for herself, but every so often, a spark of anger would take hold as she thought of Luna, no doubt enjoying her new life with the Wild Alliance.

Okay, so I was the one who ran away. But she gave me no choice—she sided with the Conclave.

She ate as much of the moldy food as she could manage, then jumped out of the trash can. She winced as she landed, and waited for the waves of pain shooting up her hind leg to subside. On her third or fourth night in the city, she'd stumbled across a series of tunnels, accessed through a broken vent in a building wall, reminding her a little of the Truthtellers' lair on the other side of the bridge. It had been warm and dry in the tunnels, and she had thanked her good fortune. But the den had other occupants—a family of foxes. Like all the other creatures she'd encountered in the city, they were

mundane, and her attempts to reason had fallen on deaf ears. She had fled, but not before one of them sank its sharp teeth into the flesh of her haunch.

It hadn't seemed like a big deal at the time, but it wasn't getting better. She twisted her body to lick the wound. It was starting to smell bad, and with each step it throbbed. Likely Ragwort would have known what to do to heal the injury, but she'd given up any hope of finding him. There were dozens of skyscrapers, each containing thousands of people, like giant anthills. She'd had to accept that her chances of seeing the little terrier again were miniscule.

There was always the Wild Alliance, of course. Willow had returned to the bridge once, early on, and stared across, considering making the return journey to seek her sister. But pride had stopped her—the shame of returning, defeated, so soon after her defiant flight from the Conclave.

She chuckled mirthlessly to herself as she hobbled along in the half-light. Any shreds of pride had *long* gone now. What stopped her from going back was mainly fear. She couldn't expect help from the Wild Alliance after so publicly rejecting them, and she wondered what Luna would say were she to turn up at the playground, smelly and starving and begging for forgiveness.

Even if she welcomed me back, the other attuned would never go against the Conclave. For some reason, all the covens seemed to follow the toads' wishes.

Sudden light and noise spilled from a doorway thrust open ahead, and Willow's reflexes sent her scurrying into an alley, concealing herself in shadow. For all her physical suffering, Willow's magic had become more potent as the days had passed. The anima was sparse, certainly, but she seemed to draw it up more easily to cast her spells of disguise. Perhaps it was due to being on her own, without Luna or any other attuned watching.

The humans who emerged were young girls, all laughing and hanging off each other. They walked in the opposite direction and Willow breathed a sigh, until one stopped and glanced back. It seemed to Willow that she was staring right in her direction. She tried to summon more anima to conceal herself, but she felt too weak to be effective.

Keep walking, urged Willow. *Go away!*

But the girl did not. Instead, she looked to her friends. "You guys go ahead! I'll catch up."

The words hit Willow like a blow—they were the first she had heard in days. She could understand! But what did that mean? That this girl was a witch?

The girl edged closer to Willow. She had dark hair and wide-spaced bright eyes. She wore a thick, fluffy scarf. Her face was . . . kind, though Willow knew how deceptive humans could be. She froze in place, focusing on her magic.

"Hello there," said the stranger. "And what's your name?"

She can see me. She's speaking to me. . . .

Willow was too shocked to reply. She kept her gaze fixed on the girl, who knelt on the ground.

"I won't hurt you," the girl said.

She reached out a hand. Willow watched closely. Something stopped her from running. Despite all the encounters she'd had with humans so far, something told her that the girl wouldn't hurt her. As the girl's fingers touched her fur, she felt a flood of comfort, and she let her spell subside. The girl smiled in response.

"There you are," she said. "My name is Violet. You look hungry."

Willow didn't feel ready to speak, but she let out an involuntary, plaintive meow. Violet smiled knowingly. "You can just be a regular cat if you want to." She stroked her gently, first behind her ears, and then along the length of her back. When her fingers touched the wound, Willow gave a squeal.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" said Violet. She peered closer. "You're hurt. . . ."

Willow mewed again, nuzzling her head into the girl's palm.

"I think you understand me, don't you?" she said.

Willow resisted still, wondering what it meant that *this* human, after days of only incoherent babble, could speak to her.

"Don't be scared," Violet continued. She reached out her other hand and tried to slide it under Willow's belly. It was too much, and Willow backed off with a faint hiss. "Okay, okay!" said Violet. "I can see you don't like that." She peered down the street. "Listen, I've got to get home, and you're welcome to come too." She stood. "I won't force you. There's food, though. And I can look at that bad leg."

Violet started walking slowly away.

Though Willow desperately wanted to follow, she hesitated. Even if this human could speak to her, it didn't mean she was a friend. Humans were manipulative and clever at concealing their true intentions.

Not all of them, said Ragwort's sad little voice in her head.

Willow remembered how much he'd missed his witch, Leanne. And maybe there was a chance this human might even know her! The girl was still walking, but looking back over her shoulder.

I might not get another opportunity, thought Willow.

And her leg would only get worse.

Making her decision, she climbed up stiffly and trotted after the human.

"There we go!" soothed the girl. "I knew we'd be friends."

The girl unfurled her scarf, and this time when she leaned down, Willow didn't protest. She let herself be scooped up into the scarf's soft folds. It smelled of the girl, and she snuggled down in her arms, rocked by the girl's gait.

A short while later, they passed through a doorway into a blast of warm air. Willow squinted against the bright light and squirmed.

"It's all right," said Violet. "We're home, that's all."

Home seemed to be a giant, marble-walled cave. Another human, wearing a uniform and cap and seated behind a sort of table, said something unintelligible to Violet, who replied, "Good evening, Harry."

Next there was a beep, and they entered a tiny room with metal walls and lots of flashing lights. Violet pressed one, and the doors closed behind them of their own accord. Again, Willow let out a panicked squeak.

"I suppose you've never been in an elevator before," said Violet. "It's not dangerous, I promise, but I bet it's a little scary."

Willow had the strangest stirring sensation in her stomach: they were moving *upward.* The lights flashed on the wall, and in a few seconds, the doors opened again.

The air was blissfully warm as Violet carried her into a large room, one wall entirely occupied by long wooden shelves covered in books and other objects. The room was sunken in the center, with pristine white-and-chrome furniture and thick rugs across the polished floor. Another wall had two huge colorful murals. Compared with the home where she and Luna had lived as kittens, this place was grand, and clearly belonged to very important humans.

Willow's eyes were drawn to the giant glass walls looking out over the city on two sides. She and Violet were so high up, she could see the distant horizon, where the last of the sun's rays lingered. Laid out in between was the entire downtown of the city—soaring buildings and rooftops, cars

crawling like insects between them. And to one side, she even saw the bridge in miniature.

As they passed a door left slightly ajar, Willow heard other human voices, and her ears pricked in panic. Violet, still holding her tight, closed it.

“Don’t worry—it’s just my parents,” she said. “They’ll be in a meeting. They won’t bother us.” Even though Violet wore a small smile, her eyes held a sadness as she spoke. “We can tell them about you later. *If* you want to stay, that is.”

They entered another room like the kitchen of the diner, with a sink and cabinets along the walls as well as a long island in the center. It was spotless, too, and Violet deposited Willow, still in the scarf, carefully on a comfortable armchair. Then she took down a bowl and laid it on the counter, before opening a cupboard with a light inside. She poked around for a little while, picking up items and then shaking her head and putting them down, before she took out a packet and peeled it open. Willow’s stomach rumbled at the sudden, delicious scent, and she watched Violet flake whatever was inside into the bowl.

“You’ll like this, I think,” said Violet. “It’s salmon. Fish! You like fish, right?”

She perched the bowl in front of Willow, on the chair. Willow didn’t hesitate and attacked the food. It tasted like nothing she’d ever had before—sweet and rich and oily.

“Woah, slow down!” said Violet. “There’s plenty more, and you’ll make yourself sick.”

But Willow didn’t listen. The *salmon*, whatever it was, was too delicious to resist, and in seconds she had devoured it all as Violet stroked her. In the back of her mind, she wondered why this strange girl was being so kind, but she was far too hungry to let caution get the better of her.

As she licked the bowl clean, the hairs across her nape lifted, alerting her that they weren’t alone after all. Her eyes fixed on two shapes lurking nearby, watching her. *Rats!* She arched her spine and hissed, looking around for a way out. She was in no condition to fight off two rats.

Violet glanced at them too but didn’t look alarmed.

“Don’t mind Itch and Fidget,” she said. “They belong to Mom and Dad.”

Belong? Willow let the word sink in, and she knew then that her earlier inkling was correct. Violet and her parents *were* witches, and these rats were bound to them. Instinct told her to run. To get as far away as possible.

“I reckon she’s figured it out,” said the larger rat.

The smaller one twitched its nose. “She’s a greedy kitty, for sure.”

Willow’s hackles were still up. If she were to run, where would she go? The door was closed. And besides, the rats had made no attempt to attack her. Nor did they look poorly fed. Could it be that, like Ragwort, they were *happy* to be bound to a human?

Violet continued to stroke her. “We’re all friends here,” she said gently, “but I won’t keep you against your will.”

Willow asked herself what Luna would do in the same situation. She probably wouldn’t have trusted Violet in the first place. And she would *never* have allowed herself to be carried to the top of a skyscraper in a human’s arms.

Well, I’m not Luna, thought Willow. She let Violet’s gentle fingers nestle in her fur, staring into the girl’s eyes. *I can trust her, I know it.*

“Thank you for the food,” she purred quietly.

“She speaks!” said the larger of the rats.

Violet drew back, her lips parting in a grin.

Willow purred. “You asked me my name. It’s Willow.”

“I *knew* you were attuned,” said Violet. “From the moment I set eyes on you. Why were you on the street? What happened?”

“It’s a long story,” Willow said. “I . . . I don’t know where to start. . . .”

“Then don’t, for now,” said Violet sensibly. “You need to rest. And I’ll clean that wound on your leg.” She beamed at Willow. “Oh, I think we must have been meant to find each other!”

Willow nuzzled her hand again, letting herself finally relax. Maybe it was true. Maybe fate was at play, and this girl and she were meant to connect.

But what that meant for the future, and for Luna, she had no idea.

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Chapter 13

Luna held a paw against the grille and focused on releasing the anima she had stored in her limbs. Under her touch, the metal fizzled and hissed, acrid smoke filling the vent. Nightshade coughed behind her.

The grille fell away, clattering into the dim space below.

“We’re in,” whispered Luna.

Kite the weasel went first, slipping through, followed by Snowflake the Siamese, who landed agilely beside him.

“All clear,” Snowflake mewed.

“Will you be all right with the drop?” Luna asked Nightshade. She was thinking that with only three legs, he might hurt himself.

“You should know by now not to ask,” he said.

Luna poked her head through, level with a flickering light bulb, then pounced down too, landing perfectly on all four paws, trying to push down her excitement at the thrill of another mission. She found herself in a dingy corridor, its concrete walls scored with filthy marks and lined with old chairs and crates. She wondered if they’d gotten this right, and this was the place at all. But her nostrils picked up the scent of animals—they were likely in the right location.

Nightshade landed beside her with a grunt. “This way,” he said, his tail swaying.

He led them along the corridor on silent paws.

It was the fourth such mission Luna had been on to liberate bound creatures, but this one felt different. Maybe it was because of the reputation of their target. On the other occasions, they’d rescued animals from single human witches—a cat, a pair of rabbits, a squirrel, and a macaw. This time,

they were after a bigger prize, and in turn the risks were higher. Jay Saxton was a name often spoken by the Renegades. A witch himself, but of the worst sort—Saxton was a kidnapper of attuned animals and was said to breed them, providing a ready supply of familiars to other witches. He was known to wield powerful magic, and to have a personal vendetta against the Renegades.

Snowflake had told her that it was Saxton who was responsible for Nightshade's missing front limb, though Luna hadn't dared get the full story from the Renegade leader.

They reached the end of the corridor, and another doorway, this one sealed with a thick padlock. "Luna?" said Nightshade. "Do your thing."

She set her fire to work on the lock. Since Luna had been living with the Renegades, Kite had taught her a new trick—to store the anima within her, so even in a barren area she could still perform magic. The lock snapped open and fell with a clunk to the ground. Kite jumped and pulled down the door handle. It swung open.

The stink made Luna reel. Animal waste, stale bodies, rotten food.

Nightshade pushed through first and they followed. A dim light illuminated two walls lined with cages, all sealed with simple bolts. At first Luna thought they might be empty, but as her eyes adjusted, she saw most were occupied, their inhabitants pressed fearfully into corners. Young dogs and cats mostly, going by the smell.

"Don't be afraid," said Nightshade. "We're here to get you out." He looked to the others. "Be quick and be quiet."

They went to work, pulling the bolts aside and encouraging the frightened occupants out. Some of the animals muttered thanks, but others seemed terrified into silence. There was a fox, too, who looked a little older, with a kink in her tail.

"You really are the Renegades!" the fox said. "I never dared to think you'd come."

One by one, the creatures gathered by the door. All were mangy and underfed, their skeletons showing beneath their fur. Luna scanned each one, but none was Willow.

It was always going to be a long shot, she told herself. *At least she hasn't fallen into Saxton's hands.*

Snowflake paused at an open door and mewled sadly. "This one didn't make it," she said, turning her blue eyes back toward them.

“That was Moss,” said the fox. “He was ill, and Saxton isn’t interested in healing magic.”

A silence fell over the horrible room.

“We can’t save them all,” growled Nightshade, though Luna sensed the emotion in his clipped voice. “Let’s get out of here before—” He paused, ears shooting erect. Luna heard it too—the distant caw of a bird.

Coalclaw!

The raven was keeping watch outside.

“Oh no . . . ,” squeaked Kite.

“What is it?” asked the fox.

Somewhere above, a door slammed. “We’ve got to go!” barked Nightshade.

They set off back along the corridor, Luna leading and Nightshade at the rear. The scent of fear in the air was strong.

“Kite, a ladder please,” said Nightshade.

The weasel rose up on his hind legs, moving his forepaws through the air. The chairs and crates in the corridor moved instantly, some rising from the ground, others scraping across. Before Luna’s eyes, they formed an uneven stack, rising from the floor to the grille hole through which they’d entered.

Another door slammed, this time from the cage room.

“Go! Go! Climb!” barked Nightshade, ushering the animals with a paw. As the terrified fugitives began to scramble up the makeshift ladder, a stocky man strode into the corridor. He wore a suit and polished shoes, and his long dark hair came to a peak in the middle of his forehead, the rest tied back in a ponytail. His black eyes flashed angrily. On the shoulder on his jacket perched a bright yellow lizard with a tall crest.

“Saxton . . . ,” breathed Snowflake.

“Renegades!” snapped the reptile.

The man lifted a clenched fist, which glowed the same color as the lizard, then flung it out. A bolt of fizzing yellow light went straight for a puppy halfway up the chair ladder, who froze in terror. Nightshade leaped up in defense, blocking the spell with his body, which shone blue as it struck him. He dropped to the ground and shook himself. Luna was relieved—and shocked—to see he seemed unharmed. She wasn’t exactly sure of Nightshade’s full magical powers, but one of them seemed to be that he could block the spells of others, absorbing their anima into his own body.

Saxton growled. “My old, hobbling friend,” he said. Luna jerked in surprise, then realized, *Just like magical animals can understand each other, we can understand witches.*

“Keep climbing,” grunted Nightshade. “We’ll hold them off.”

Two more men appeared at Saxton’s back, holding devices in their hands that looked a bit like the weapons the human police officers carried.

They pointed them toward the animals, and Luna saw the weapons’ muzzles flash. Kite squealed in pain and rolled across the ground, but Snowflake sprang aside. She glared, her ears pulled back, and Luna heard the sudden whistle of wind. It rippled her fur, and she pressed herself to the ground. Farther along the corridor, crates lifted, carried by the hurricane, and flew toward their assailants. One of the attackers was struck square in the head and fell down hard. The other ducked. Saxton, though, stood his ground and met the flying crate with a fist that shattered it to pieces in a yellow flash.

Luna rushed to Kite’s side as Nightshade continued to usher the rescued animals to the safety of the vent. The weasel was standing again, swaying on his stubby legs. She couldn’t see any blood, but his fur bore a black scorch mark. “Just a stun gun,” he said. “I’m all right. I think.”

Snowflake was continuing to hold the two remaining attackers at bay, but from her trembling limbs, Luna knew her anima was running low. The power of her wind seemed to be dropping. Leaning into the remaining gale, Saxton took slow and steady steps toward them, his face twisted into an angry sneer and his glowing hand raised as though reaching to grab them.

Luna let her fire flow. The flames tangled with the eddying winds and swirled through the corridor, torching the remaining chairs and crates. She gritted her teeth and redoubled her effort, feeling the intense heat baking her own whiskers. She only had to keep Saxton and his thugs back until the others had escaped, and if it meant using every last shred of her anima, she would do so.

Snowflake sagged, her own reserves exhausted, her sides heaving with the effort.

“Get out!” Luna yowled. “I’ve got this.”

Snowflake made for the ladder. Luna’s fire had completely blocked the corridor with a wall of deadly, licking flames, and now she let her spell die. Kite fell back from the first chair. “I can’t, I’m too weak,” he whined. “Leave me behind.”

“Don’t be silly!” said Nightshade.

He gripped Kite in his jaws by the scruff and climbed himself, scrambling through the vent after Snowflake.

Luna went last, darting up the wobbling structure. She had almost reached the top when she felt her back paws slipping out from under her. She scrabbled desperately, reaching for the lip of the vent, and managed to grab on with her front paws just as the chairs toppled into the corridor with a crash. For a moment she dangled, hind legs wheeling in the empty air.

Below, the fire was dwindling. She saw Saxton step through it, both hands spread as if he’d doused the flames himself. He looked up at Luna, his face contorted with rage. His whole body rippled in a haze of heat. “At least I get one,” he snarled.

Pulling back an arm, he sent a bolt of yellow magic right toward her. Luna heaved with everything she had and hauled her body into the vent just as the magic slammed below. The metal chute shook around her, and she feared she might tumble back through and into Saxton’s clutches. But the vent held.

Without a backward glance, she scurried after the others.

The Renegades and the rescued animals ran, guided by Coalclaw’s gliding silhouette in the sky above. It was way past the hour when humans walked the streets, especially in the depths of winter. The air had a cold bite that burned Luna’s lungs.

“I’m fine! I can walk myself!” Kite protested. Nightshade slowed his steps, set the weasel down, then let his mouth open in a pant. They continued to walk at a rapid pace. It wasn’t far to the river, and Luna was looking forward to crossing back to the safer side.

“We did it!” said Snowflake.

Exhilaration flooded Luna’s blood. The rescue had undoubtedly been their most ambitious yet.

“Saxton has a new familiar,” said Kite, inspecting the burn mark on his flank. “A yellow lizard.”

“He tends to go through them quickly,” growled Nightshade ominously.

They kept pace until they reached the bridge and crossed using the lower walkway, cars rumbling above. A light snow had begun to fall, and Luna watched the flakes melt into the river’s black surface. Only when they’d

reached the far bank did Nightshade finally stop. The rescued animals clung together, shivering against the cold. Some of them were gazing around in wonder, while others seemed lost in their own internal thoughts. Luna guessed that some might never have ventured outside in their lives if the stories of Saxton's brutal methods were true.

"You're free now," said Nightshade. "And the choice of how to live your lives is yours. If you wish to live among the humans, on that side of the river, you may. If you do, be aware—they will never stop trying to bind you. Some"—here his mouth twisted in disgust—"some choose that life of servitude, but for those who cherish freedom, the life of the unbound beckons on this side of the bridge. Here you can find a coven and connect to the purest anima. Here you practice your own magic, unsullied by the humans."

Not much of a choice when you put it like that, thought Luna.

Unsurprisingly, none of the animals moved back toward the bridge. In fact, they huddled closer to Snowflake and Kite.

"Can we come with you?" asked a fluffy puppy with golden fur.

"Of course," said Nightshade, leaning down until he was nose-to-nose with the smaller dog. "You are all welcome to sample life with the Renegades."

They set off again at a gentler pace back toward the junkyard. The adrenaline drained from Luna's veins, and she was left feeling deflated. She'd told herself beforehand that finding Willow was highly unlikely, but the disappointment still hurt like a deep bruise.

As she pondered, Nightshade dropped back to fall in step beside her. "You saved us tonight," he said.

"We all did our part," she purred.

"And you the most," he replied. "That wall of fire was something else."

"I'm just glad we got them all out," said Luna, shyly deflecting his praise. "And if I never see Jay Saxton again, it will be too soon."

"I second that," said Nightshade. "If anything, I fear his magic is becoming more formidable. Reptiles are rare and impressive familiars." He snorted. "But don't be modest. You're an asset to our team—a natural Renegade. Why so glum?"

"Because we still haven't found my sister," she said. As she said it, she feared she had let a hint of accusation creep into her voice; a tiny trace of her frustrations that, after so many days, they'd still not even gained a hint

of her sister's whereabouts. But if Nightshade was offended, he didn't show it.

"I told you, it won't be easy," he replied. "Coalclaw flies into the city daily. She has scouts, but there's been no word." He spoke softly. "It might be time to accept that something could have happened to her."

The words struck deep in Luna's heart, and she stopped in her tracks. "She's not dead."

"I hope not," said Nightshade. "I really do. But if she's already bound, that might explain why Willow hasn't been spotted. Familiars don't get out much."

"Willow?" said the fox, who'd introduced himself earlier as Acorn. "Did you say Willow?"

"I did," said Nightshade with a glare. "I wasn't aware I was being spied on."

Acorn swished his tail. "Foxes have good hearing. Is Willow a young gray cat, by any chance?"

"Yes!" mewed Luna, marching on the fox. "Have you seen her? Is she alive?"

"Not seen," replied Acorn quickly. "Heard. In fact, it was Jay Saxton who spoke of her."

Luna swallowed thickly. The thought of that brute harming her sister was too much to bear.

"Saxton had been commissioned to supply an attuned animal to the daughter of the Rousseaus—a *really* big deal for him—but they pulled out at the last minute."

"The Rousseaus?" growled Nightshade. "They're two of the most powerful witches in the city."

"Yes, yes," growled Luna impatiently, "but what does this have to do with Willow?"

"Well," said the fox, "the reason they pulled out was because their daughter had already found a potential familiar of her own—a cat she rescued from the street. I'm sure she was called Willow."

Luna's heart sank through her paws. Her head swam with nausea.

"I have to go back!" she said, pacing. "Where can I find this human family?"

Nightshade shook his head. "You don't get it," he rumbled. "You can't mess with the Rousseaus."

“They have *my sister*!” snapped Luna.

“And they have magic that makes Saxton’s look like puppy play,” said Nightshade. “If they’ve decided to bind Willow to their daughter, getting her back is going to be almost impossible.”

“*Almost*?” said Luna.

Nightshade’s tail drooped. “Luna, listen to me—I’m not exaggerating. We can’t just run into something like that without serious planning. It would be a suicide mission.”

Luna sighed. She’d never seen Nightshade so serious before. So worried.

And why *should* he risk his life, and those of the other Renegades, for a cat he’d barely met?

But that didn’t mean *she* wouldn’t try.

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Chapter 14

Willow chased Luna through empty streets. They all looked the same, and, however hard she ran, Luna was always the same distance ahead. But she couldn't stop running, even though her lungs burned. At each corner, Luna paused, looked back, and then pressed on. By the time Willow reached the same spot, her sister was a distant, pale, flashing shape.

"Wait!" she called. "Please!" But Luna just laughed. *She doesn't understand what it's like to feel alone.*

But no, not alone. Willow realized there was another creature in the streets. As she pursued Luna, she was being watched. And tonight, she let her sister go, let her vanish around a corner.

Willow rounded on her own pursuer, and her heart lifted to see his white whiskery muzzle. Ragwort!

"Hello, you!" he yapped excitedly. "I've been trying to keep up!"

Willow was confused, but happy. "Where've you been? Are you back with Leanne?"

"That's not important now," Ragwort said, tail wagging. "I need to tell you how to get into the Renegades' lair!"

"Didn't you tell me that before?"

"I don't think so," said Ragwort. "It's the old junkyard, beneath the railway bridge. You have to jump onto the top and scratch the windshield with this symbol." He moved his paw through the air, almost toppling over as he lost his balance. Then he nodded past her. "Your sister's watching, you know?"

Willow turned and saw Luna's mischievous face peering around the corner ahead. "I can't catch her," she said. "It's really not funny any . . ."

But Ragwort had vanished, and—

Willow jerked awake, blinking painfully at the sharp headache between her brows. Weak winter light fell through the floor-to-ceiling windows of Violet's bedroom, onto the chair in which she lay curled. She guessed from the position of the sun between the buildings opposite that it was almost time for Violet to return from school in the city, a moment Willow had come to look forward to, when it could be just the two of them again.

A scurrying beneath made her peer over the edge of the chair, and she saw Itch, the smaller of the Rousseaus' rats, dart across the carpet. He paused at the open door, looking back with a snigger, much in the way her sister had done in the dream. Then he was gone through the door, into the apartment.

She lifted a paw to touch a tender spot on her head and felt a scratch there.

It must have been the rat!

Neither of the rats had ever entered the bedroom before while she had been staying there, and she wondered what Violet would have to say.

She knew the two rodents didn't much like her, but this was the first time either of them had actually tried to do her harm. Most of the time they kept their distance and muttered while shooting nasty glances.

Let them try that when I'm awake, she thought.

Violet had told her to ignore them, but Willow suspected their attitude had a lot to do with that of Violet's parents, the witches to whom they were bound. Thankfully, Violet's mother and father weren't around much, but when her mother had first come across Willow, on her second day in the apartment, she hadn't seemed very happy about it. Willow had been playing with a foam ball, tossed by Violet, and had found herself tangled with Mrs. Rousseau's ankles. For a moment the woman had looked startled, and had lifted a hand with long, clawlike nails. Under her breath she'd spoken words in a language Willow didn't understand.

"No!" Violet had screamed, throwing herself between her mother and Willow. "She's with me!"

The noise had brought Mr. Rousseau from his study, by which time Willow was safely cradled in Violet's arms.

"Her name is Willow," she explained.

The parents had shared a strange look, half puzzled, half pleased, before Mr. Rousseau had said, "Well, at least it's a well-respected species, even if

we can’t be sure of the pedigree.”

Since then, Willow had hardly seen them, and when she had crossed their paths, they had treated her politely but without affection. She in turn was happy to keep out of their way.

Over the days that followed, she and Violet had settled into their own routine. They’d eat together in the morning, before Violet would dress in her school uniform. Violet would brush Willow’s fur or dangle a string for her, laughing as Willow leaped for it, before she had to leave for school. And then Willow would doze for most of the day, ready for her return.

Violet’s bedroom was warm and cozy. It had a friendlier feel than the rest of the apartment and an incredible view over the city, now bathed in a brittle winter light that made the distant river a silver ribbon. The water seemed so far away now, as did the night when she had crossed it and spoken her final words to her sister. Luna’s life on the other side with the Wild Alliance would be cold and miserable at this time of year, Willow suspected.

She found she was thinking less about her sister, and when she did, it was with a bittersweet affection rather than the deep longing of before. Willow still occasionally considered leaving the apartment—indeed, Violet said she was free to come and go whenever she chose—but the fact was, despite the unfriendliness of the parents and their familiars, Willow liked it here. Violet had been so kind, healing her injured leg and feeding her the most incredible array of delicious food—it was almost a perfect life. Her fur was sleek and her form had filled out again. She had toys to play with, and Violet gave the *best* cuddles. Once in a while, they practiced sneaking around the apartment building together, Willow using her power to hide them both in the shadows. More than one neighbor had jumped uneasily at the sound of Violet’s giggle in a seemingly empty hallway. What could Luna possibly give her that she didn’t have?

We both made our choices, and I’m happy with mine.

But it was more than just the comforts or the games they played. Just *being* with Violet felt special, in almost the way she had felt with Luna in the diner. The human girl seemed to understand her better than anyone. Maybe even better than her sister had. Perhaps that was because they were both lonely in their own way. Outsiders. From what Willow had witnessed, Violet’s parents barely spent any time with her because they were always working. They rarely ate together or went out. And Willow had never seen

them laugh in each other's company. The Rousseaus seemed to prefer their rats to their daughter.

But when it was just the two of them—Willow and Violet—they could talk for hours or just be silent together. There was no blame and no expectation. Violet thought, like she did, that loyalty was important—that you should stick by the people, or animals, you cared for. *And I guess, in the end, maybe Luna didn't believe that.*

She must have dropped off again, because when she woke the windows were black, the sky starless. Her first thought was Violet. *She should be home by now.* But those worries quickly faded as her ears picked up raised voices outside the bedroom door. A dim light was on in the main room. Hackles rising, Willow climbed stiffly down from the chair and reached out with her front paws to stretch her spine. She summoned the shadows to make herself invisible and edged out through the crack of the bedroom door.

The magic was second nature now—she could turn it on and off like the humans turned what Violet had told her was called a tap to make water flow. She remembered one of the Wild Alliance telling her the anima's currents were blocked in the streets of the city, but up here it seemed to flow clear and pure.

Perhaps it was because Violet's parents were witches, somehow drawing the anima to their home.

But Willow had another suspicion—that her growing abilities were linked to Violet, or somehow augmented by their proximity to each other. They'd spend hours playing hide-and-seek in the vast apartment, with Willow using her skills of disguise to elude her human friend. Even when she drew on her most powerful magic, she was never entirely invisible to Violet. Just like the moment when they first met, Violet saw through it somehow.

"It's time, Violet!"

That was her father, his voice stern.

Willow crept across the living area to the door of the study. It was one of the few rooms she had never entered. There'd been no express instruction to avoid it, but it was clearly private to Violet's parents, and she sensed she'd be in a great deal of trouble should she ever set paw inside.

“People are talking,” came the voice of Mrs. Rousseau. “They want to know why you haven’t committed to a binding.”

“Well, that’s none of their business!” Violet snapped.

“Don’t argue with me, young lady!” Mr. Rousseau said. “We’re only trying to help you live a *normal* life.”

“There’s *nothing* normal about our life,” retorted Violet.

Willow peered around the door, calling her shadow magic closer.

It was a dark room, with no windows, and completely unlike the rest of the apartment. It felt oppressive and ancient, with a large, heavy wooden desk and huge armchairs covered in dark leather. The room was lit with candles in metal holders on the walls, and the bookshelves were lined with huge tomes. Violet sat on a stiff-backed wooden chair, and her parents stood before her. Mrs. Rousseau, like her husband, was very tall and thin. She always wore a long black dress, which made her seem even taller still. They reminded Willow of two looming black trees in the dead of winter.

“I’m sorry,” said Violet, more calmly. “I’m just not ready.”

“I understand that you’ve wanted to get to know your cat first. But we’ve been patient for long enough,” said her father, looking exasperated. “We’ve annoyed some very important people, and our standing will suffer if this matter isn’t brought to a conclusion.”

“What your father is saying,” said her mother, laying a hand on Violet’s shoulder, “is that you have to bind with the cat, whether you like it or not.”

Violet shook her head. “But what if she doesn’t want to?” she asked meekly.

Willow flinched. They’d talked about binding, of course, but only in a general sense, during their sleepy chats on Violet’s bed, and she even suspected that it was something Violet would welcome, though the human girl had never said as much. Willow had told Violet early on that she didn’t want to—that it was too big a step. The truth was that she was scared. To be bound, besides whatever painful *ritual* was involved, would be to close a door on any chance of being with Luna again. Violet seemed to understand, and had admitted, somewhat wistfully, that her parents would never allow it anyway. Apparently, they had other creatures in mind to be bound with their daughter, and until that moment they’d given no indication they thought much of their houseguest at all.

That suited Willow perfectly. She and Violet loved being in each other’s company.

What more do we need?

"Since when has an animal's wishes come into it?" scoffed her father. "She'll adapt. Even unwilling familiars come to love their owners. She wouldn't be our first choice, but we sense what she's capable of."

"And even a stray off the street is better than nothing," added Mrs. Rousseau.

"I won't do it," said Violet. "I took her in because she needed help, not to *use* her."

Mr. Rousseau rolled his eyes. "Will you listen to yourself, girl? That's what familiars are *for.* To be *used*. We take good care of them, but they're a tool to channel magic!"

"Maybe for you," said Violet quietly.

"For all our kind, from the beginning of time," said Mr. Rousseau. "Mr. Saxton has provided several alternatives, none of which were good enough, you said."

"*You* said it was important to feel a connection. Well, I didn't feel anything with any of them."

"Without a familiar, you won't be able to use your powers, Violet," pleaded Mrs. Rousseau. "You won't be a real witch."

Violet stood up suddenly, her face fierce. "I won't force her," she said. "And that's final."

She made to leave, but her father blocked her path. He raised a finger, his gaze solemn. "Bind with the cat, or we get rid of her."

"You wouldn't!" wailed Violet.

"Try me," spat her father. "This is my home, and I decide who lives under this roof."

Violet pushed past him, and Willow backed out of the door. The human girl strode to her bedroom, tears streaming from her eyes.

Willow followed her and threw off her invisibility spell as she entered. Violet was in her chair, knees tucked under her, her face buried in her hands. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed. Willow hopped up beside her and rubbed the top of her head into Violet's shoulder. The girl opened her arms and let Willow curl into her lap.

"I was listening," said Willow.

"I thought so," said Violet, hugging her close. "I'm so sorry. I won't let them do it."

Willow wondered what she meant. Let them bind her, or let them throw her out on the street? The latter was unbearable, but to be bound . . . was that really so bad? Ragwort had liked it, hadn't he?

And just because the covens looked down their muzzles and beaks at the idea, that didn't mean there couldn't be plenty of perfectly good bindings.

She was about to say as much when footsteps stomped outside the door, and Mrs. Rousseau burst in. Fidget sat on her shoulder, clinging to her black dress with tiny claws, his long tail looped behind her neck. The rat wore a nasty smirk.

"Your father and I have discussed it, and we need to take care of this now," said Violet's mother. "You're falling behind your peers, Violet, and you need a familiar who is powerful enough to help you. The daughter of such powerful witches should have great magic!"

"No!"

Willow's hackles rose and she sat up, but Mrs. Rousseau waved a hand and Willow's whole body stiffened, locked in place.

"Leave her alone!" said Violet.

Her mother reached forward and grabbed Willow behind her head, pulling her away. Willow willed her claws to extend, but she couldn't move a muscle. Violet lunged after her, but Mrs. Rousseau was already carrying Willow from the bedroom. Her husband stood waiting with a box of what looked like interwoven twigs, etched with strange symbols. Willow found herself thrust inside, the lid closed over her head. She found she could move again, but the gaps were too small to even reach out a paw.

"We warned you," said her mother. "We tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen."

"Please, don't do this!" cried Violet, trailing behind them to the elevator.

"This isn't your choice anymore," muttered her father. "This is for your own good, and you'll both thank us in the end."

Willow cowered against the inside of the case, wondering what he meant. She remembered all she had heard from the covens about binding, the way they'd lowered their voices in terror when speaking about the act.

I'm about to find out why the unbound hate witches so much. . . .

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Chapter 15

Kite had started to snore. Lying on his back, with his belly in the air, his stubby legs twitched.

"He can sleep anywhere," said Snowflake.

Luna could hardly blame the weasel for having a nap.

They were spending their fourth night on the fifth floor of a half-built skyscraper, open to the elements—a bare edifice of steel and glass where the wind swirled through, carrying drizzle or snow or simply the traffic fumes from below. Opposite stood the skyscraper where Acorn said the Rousseau family had their apartment.

Four days and four nights in a makeshift nest, with Coalclaw flying in food she had scavenged from the city below. Four days and four nights watching and waiting for any sign of her sister. Luna's hopes were starting to dwindle. Not only had they not seen Willow, but they hadn't seen the Rousseaus either.

Several of the apartments had pets—dogs and cats mostly, though one had a spider in a tank, and another a bouncing rabbit. But other apartments seemed never to open their curtains at all, or switch on their lights. Coalclaw said there might be several witches living in the building, and there were simple magic charms to prevent unwelcome eyes from seeing inside.

Not for the first time, Nightshade's words echoed in her head. *It's a lost cause, Luna. The Rousseaus are careful and meticulous. If they don't want Willow to be found, they have enough spells to keep her hidden.*

She'd ignored him, of course. She *had* to. Not only was Willow her sister, but *she* was a Renegade now. It was her job to free creatures in the

thrall of human witches. And his too, she had reminded him.

Nightshade had kinked an eyebrow at that. “This isn’t a normal mission,” he’d sighed. “The building itself will be protected with magic we can’t even fathom. The Rousseaus will think nothing of killing you if they get wind of your presence.”

All the more reason to get my sister out of there.

At least Nightshade hadn’t stopped the others from coming with her. After all, the Renegades prized freedom above everything. But they were under strict instructions not to actually enter the apartment block. Luna was grateful for the help she had received so far, even if Kite, now snoring loudly, couldn’t always be said to be on *high* alert. She did wonder how much longer the patience of Snowflake and Coalclaw would last as well.

The Siamese dipped her head, blue eyes narrowing. “Movement,” she said. “Down there!”

Luna crept to the edge of the open-sided room, feeling the wind tug at her fur.

Two people were coming down the front steps of the skyscraper—a tall woman and a girl. The girl was crying. “Is it them?” she asked, her heart skipping.

“I think so,” mewed Snowflake.

They were heading toward a waiting black car, polished as a beetle’s carapace. A moment later, a man followed. He was holding what looked like a carry case for pets. Luna’s heartbeat sped to a rapid patter. Could her sister be inside?

“Coalclaw—follow them!” she said.

The raven had been roosting above on a ceiling joist and gave her head a shake. “What? Where?”

“The car!” said Luna, flicking her tail downward. The three humans were climbing in.

Coalclaw leaped from her perch and sailed into the night. Snowflake gave Kite a shove with a forepaw. “Wake up, sleepyhead.”

The weasel scrambled onto his paws. “I wasn’t asleep.”

Luna had already set off down the bare concrete stairs, leaping four or five at a time, her heart thumping. She reached street level just in time to see the car rounding a corner, with Coalclaw gliding in its wake two stories above. Luna broke into a sprint, eating up the sidewalk in long strides. She paid no heed to the human pedestrians, darting in and out of their legs to

astonished cries, and didn't look back to check that the others were still with her.

I can't lose her . . . I can't!

But the car was quicker. Several blocks along, it made another turn, out of sight. Even Coalclaw was falling back. Luna pushed herself harder, her chest burning. She crossed a road, drawing angry car horns.

By the time she reached the corner and skidded to a halt, she could see neither the raven nor the Rousseaus' car. She continued at a jog, checking left and right at each intersection, her stomach twisting with nausea from the run—and the realization that her sister might be gone, the last opportunity having slipped between her claws. The streets were quieter here, surrounding a large square that looked like a disused marketplace, with the stalls boarded up.

"I lost them," mewed Luna to herself.

"But *I* didn't."

She glanced up. Coalclaw was on a railing. "They parked a few blocks away," she cawed. "Shall we wait for Snowflake and Kite?"

"No," said Luna. "There might not be time. Take me there."

The raven led Luna to the spot as quickly as she could follow. As she paced through the winding streets, she felt the anima thicken in the air, and it gave her strength. There was no obvious reason for the increase in magical energy—the buildings here looked just the same as the rest of the city—but when they reached their destination, she could see why. The house outside which the car had parked looked far older than anything around it. Derelict and wooden-framed, with a sagging roof, it seemed a miracle it was standing at all. The windows were boarded up. It was surrounded by an iron railing topped with spikes, and its overgrown front yard made it seem even more at odds with the barren surroundings. The anima was heady, though—Luna thought she could see it lingering in the air like smoke. She blinked, and it was gone.

The gleaming black car was parked under a flickering streetlamp right in front. Mrs. Rousseau and her daughter were already making their way to the front door, hand in hand. The girl was no longer crying, but glaring at her mother angrily. Luna had started to cross the street when Mr. Rousseau unfolded his long body from the front of the vehicle. She took shelter

behind a fire hydrant and watched as he dipped back in to pull out the carry case. He placed it on the sidewalk. Across the street, Luna's heart was in her mouth.

The human witch drew a small silver key from his black coat pocket and slipped it into the case's lid. The girl was glancing back from the head of the path as her father reached inside. He held up a squirming gray shape. Luna gasped.

"Willow . . . ," she mewled in desperation. She'd hoped it could be possible, and yet actually to see her sister after so long split her heart in two.

She fought the urge to run out and hurl herself, teeth-first, at the man so cruelly dangling Willow from his fist. If Nightshade was right, if she did anything rash it might be the end of both her and Willow. So she watched, burning, as he carried her up the path to his wife and daughter. The door opened as he arrived, but in the dim light Luna couldn't see who stood on the other side. The girl went inside first, and Mr. Rousseau handed over Willow to the person within. Something else escaped from the bottom of his coat—it looked like a rat—which scurried over the threshold. It was followed by another that appeared at Mrs. Rousseau's ankles. Their long tails snaked inside, and the door closed, leaving the adult couple outside. They turned and headed back toward the car. On the way, Mrs. Rousseau put a comforting hand on her husband's sleeve. He nodded stiffly.

What are they up to? Luna wondered.

Whatever it was, she had no doubt her sister was in grave danger. Storming the front door was not an option.

"We need to find another way in," she hissed to Coalclaw.

"Stay out of sight," said the raven.

She took off, flapping quickly into a narrow alley that ran alongside the derelict house. Luna followed, skirting the chassis of the black car in which the Rousseaus sat, presumably waiting for their daughter to reemerge.

It was almost pitch black in the alleyway, the ground clogged with nettles. But a light came on upstairs, a soft glow behind a window boarded roughly with wooden slats. The wall below was smooth brick, with no way to climb.

Luna made a try anyway, rushing up and scrambling with her claws, but she only got halfway before she fell back to earth. Coalclaw landed on the windowsill above.

“Can you see anything?” Luna hissed.

She shook her beak. “No, but I don’t think it’ll take much to pry some of these nails out.”

“Can you lift me?” asked Luna.

Coalclaw cocked her head. “I can try.”

She dropped to the ground, and Luna lowered her head. Coalclaw flapped onto Luna’s back. “This might hurt a bit.”

Luna gritted her teeth. *We don’t have a choice. . . .*

She sucked in a breath as Coalclaw’s talons sank into her fur, pinching the flesh beneath. Then, with a series of painful jerks, they rose into the air. Suspended under the raven, Luna prayed she wouldn’t let go. The ground fell away as they circled upward. As soon as she was close enough, Luna reached out her legs and gained a paw hold on the narrow sill. Coalclaw released her grip, and Luna shook her shoulders. “Let’s not do that again,” she mewed, “but thank you.”

The raven was right about the nails. Some were missing, others looked loose and rusty. She set to work with her claws, while Coalclaw used her beak, and between them they tugged out the nails. Luna levered at the wood with her paw, and it swung loose, exposing a hole big enough for them both to squeeze through.

The other side was lit with a single bare bulb, and she saw a hallway of scuffed wooden floorboards. She slipped inside, landing silently. The corridor was completely bare otherwise, though the ceiling was crowded with thick, sagging cobwebs. At one end of the corridor, Luna saw the top of a flight of stairs. Several doorways, all closed, led off to the right and left, but it was the one at the end that held her focus. It was painted black and etched with what could only be magical symbols—twisted stars, lightning bolts, and shapes that resembled swirling water, flames, or wind. More than that, two rats were standing guard on either side.

“Well, well,” squeaked the smaller of the two. “Looks like we have uninvited guests.”

It darted across the floorboards toward them. Coalclaw leaped down from the sill, blue lightning crackling from her talons and arcing toward the rodent. It dodged, appearing in an instant several paces from where it had previously stood. Either it had moved fast, or simply rematerialized, much like Thorn from the Wild Alliance. Coalclaw redirected her blue lightning, but the rat performed the same trick. It was getting closer all the time,

untroubled by the attacks. Then it disappeared for a third time and suddenly it was on Coalclaw, burying its teeth into her belly feathers. In a cacophony of squawks and squeals, the two creatures rolled across the ground, fighting for the upper hand.

So distracted was Luna that when she turned to find the other rat, it was already bearing down on her. She summoned a burst of flame, but even before the air caught alight, she felt claws digging into her back. She bucked and arched, then dropped into a roll, trying to throw it off, but the rodent's grip was strong.

"I'll tear you to pieces!" it hissed, and sure enough, Luna felt what must have been its razor-sharp teeth sinking into her spine. She felt her fur rip from the roots. She threw herself against the wall, hoping to crush its small body, but now it was climbing her back, its tail lashing her sides. It reached her head, and she clamped shut her eyes to protect them, but instead it dug its claws into her forehead as if trying to burrow into her brain.

"I'm going to taste your thoughts, Renegade!" it snarled.

The weight of it was horrible, pulling on her neck, and with every moment that passed, its claws seemed to delve deeper, through flesh and into bone. It was stronger than any rat she had ever met—magically strong—and she realized its threats were not empty. If she couldn't shake it loose, it really would get inside her skull.

She drew upon her anima and focused inward, summoning her fire. But instead of releasing it in a blast of flame or directing it through her paw, she let the heat grow across her own fur until she could almost smell it burning. She had practiced once or twice before in the junkyard but never allowed it to get this far. Now she felt the tips of her whiskers glow red-hot, and finally, with a cry, the rat released its hold. It fell onto its side, and she saw with horror that its front claws were smoking and mangled. It looked up at her with terror. "What are you?" it squealed.

She didn't wait a moment longer and sank her teeth into its neck. The rat shuddered, tail squirming weakly, and then the life left it.

Coalclaw had the other rat pinned under her talons, still crackling with blue light. When he lifted it, the rat was still, blood seeping from its mouth.

"Are you okay?" she panted.

Coalclaw nodded. "Those two witches will sense their familiars are dead." She pointed her beak toward the black door. "We don't have long."

"Then let's do this," hissed Luna.

She ran at the door and sent out a burst of flame. It blasted open, smoke curling across the ceiling above their heads.

As it cleared, and she saw inside, Luna let out a cry.

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Chapter 16

Willow wasn't sure which of them was trembling more—herself, or Violet, in whose arms she was cradled. It was a small comfort to be held when everything else was uncertain and terrifying.

She couldn't see the man's face as he led them up the creaking stairs. The black robe he wore had a hood and came down to his feet. *Does he live here?* she wondered. One thing was certain—he was a witch, because she could understand him when he told Violet's parents to wait outdoors. For some reason, the rats had been admitted, though, and they came up the steps behind, their claws rattling on the bare wood.

The man pulled a cord on the wall, and a single light bulb sprang into life. It illuminated a gleaming black door at the end of the upstairs corridor. Markings had been scored into the surface, exposing white wood beneath. They were symbols, and as they approached, Willow could have sworn they *moved* like some living thing.

The robed man pushed open the door and led them inside. Even if Violet had tried to run, Willow didn't see where they could have gone. Itch and Fidget didn't come in with them, but instead took up positions on either side of the door, looking out into the hallway.

The door closed again. For a moment the room was completely black, but then candles sprang to life at regular intervals on the walls. From the way the man dropped his arm, Willow realized that he'd somehow lit them. And then she saw a small, furred face peering out under his cuff. It might have been a mouse, but she couldn't be sure. In any case, it seemed that he had some sort of fire magic. *Like Luna.* The candles themselves were held in bronze-colored sconces and left thick crusts of wax where they'd dripped to

the ground below. The walls, bare plaster that had crumbled away in places, were streaked with red spatter—some daubed into the same sort of symbols as on the door. Others reminded Willow of the drawings on the walls of the Truthteller lair—unnatural animal bodies, but these had the heads of human beings. They made Willow shudder.

The floor was wooden, like the rest of the house, except for a circle as wide as Violet was tall, made with more molten wax. In the center sat a red cushion and nestled on top of that was a golden dagger, short but wickedly sharp, its handle shaped like a coiled rope.

Without uttering another word, the man backed out of the room and closed the door behind him. There was no other exit and no window.

"What is this place?" mewed Willow. The room seemed to swallow her voice.

Violet set her gently onto the floorboards, the whites of her eyes wide as she looked around the room. Her shoulders sagged and she dropped to the ground beside Willow. "It's a House of Conjunction," she whispered. "That creepy old man is the custodian. It's his job to prepare the ritual."

"The binding?"

Violet nodded. "No other witches can be present, or their magic might interfere."

She began to cry softly, her shoulders shaking. Willow climbed into her lap. "Don't worry—it'll be okay."

From the desperate glance Violet gave her, Willow suspected she didn't know what she was talking about.

Violet sniffed and wiped her eyes with the cuff of her sleeve. "There are many different binding methods. We Rousseaus are very *traditional.*" She looked disgusted as she said it, her eyes moving to the knife. "Blood must mix with blood." Willow shuddered in her lap. "Don't be afraid," continued Violet. "I would never do it. I'd never hurt you." She paused and swallowed. "Whatever *they* do to us. I'm so sorry, Willow. My parents think they're helping me, but I never should have gotten you involved in this."

"I heard what your parents said," purred Willow. "If we want to stay together, I don't think we have a choice." She missed her sister, but Violet was more real to her now—she might never see Luna again. And being tied to Violet, staying with her, didn't sound so bad.

Violet looked into her eyes sadly. "You're a lot braver than me, Willow," she said. "I wish they'd just let us be together, without all this." She cast a

hand around the room.

Willow climbed from her lap and walked into the wax circle. She expected to feel something as she crossed, but there was nothing. She leaned over the cushion and picked up the dagger in her mouth. The metal felt cold as ice against her tongue, and she carried it to Violet, putting it on the ground in front of her. “We can do it,” she said. “I trust you.”

Violet stared at her. “But you said . . . ?”

“I know,” she mewed. “But things have changed, haven’t they? That was the old me, and I didn’t know any better. Violet, you’ve been kinder to me than anyone I’ve ever met—human or otherwise.” *Kinder even than my sister, at times.* “To be bound to you would be an honor.”

Violet smiled uncertainly through her tears. “I feel the same. And *I* know we’d be great together. I’m not going to be the kind of witch my parents are, who thinks their familiar is just their servant. We could be a team. But if we do it, there’s no going back. A binding is for life. Are you really sure?”

Willow looked at the dagger, marveling that it had come to this. After all she’d heard in the covens about the evils of binding, of bondage to humans, here she was, on the cusp of taking that step into the unknown. She thought of Luna, and what her sister would say if she were here. *She would tell me I was crazy, stupid, making the biggest mistake of my life. She’d tell me humans can’t be trusted, and she’d probably try to drag me out of here by my tail.*

But Luna *wasn’t here.* She had abandoned Willow, chosen the covens over her. And she could *never* understand.

“I’m sure,” said Willow.

Violet picked up the dagger and stood slowly, stepping into the wax circle. She gestured for Willow to join her, and Willow followed. This time felt different. Now the anima crept over the wax as well, spilling around her ankles.

From outside the room came a skittering, shuffling sound. Both Violet and Willow glanced toward the door. There was a great series of thumps, then what sounded like the deep caw of a bird. Then silence.

“Should we look?” asked Willow.

She was about to step out of the circle, when suddenly the door burst inward on a wave of heat. Flames licked inside the room. The door was on fire, throwing flakes of ash onto the floorboards. And through the choking black smoke came a shadowy shape.

Willow couldn’t speak. She could hardly draw a breath.

It was Luna.

“Who are you?” asked Violet, brandishing the dagger in front of her. She stepped in front of Willow protectively.

Luna’s gaze fell on Violet, then the blade, and hardened. In the kernels of her eyes, Willow saw the spark of orange fire.

“No!” she screeched. “No, Luna, don’t!”

Willow jumped as the ball of fire coursed toward Violet, and it struck Willow full in the chest, sending her reeling. The pain came a heartbeat later, a searing agony across her limbs. She landed, surrounded by flames, her fur ablaze. Through the pain she heard Violet’s desperate scream. Then the girl was beside her, pressing the cushion to the flames to douse them. It seemed a lifetime, but it must only have been a moment or two before they were extinguished. Willow looked in shock at her blackened fur and the raw red flesh of her flank. The pain was blinding. Everything hurt.

“Get away from her!” snarled Luna. Her eyes still flickered, and Willow feared at any moment she might release more magic.

Violet stood between them. “You’ve hurt her,” she said. “*You* get away.”

“We need to go!” squawked another voice. Now Willow saw there was a large black bird right on the threshold. It looked like Coalclaw, the Renegade guide who’d led them to the Truthteller lair. But why was *she* with Luna?

She struggled to her paws, pushing against the pain. Part of her was so happy to see her sister, to know she was all right, but why had Luna attacked?

“What are you *doing* here?” she mewed.

“I came to rescue you,” said Luna.

“Like this?” said Willow. She moved closer, and the fire vanished from Luna’s eyes as she saw her sister’s wounds.

“I didn’t mean . . . ,” said Luna. “I was trying to . . .”

“I told you not to. You didn’t listen,” said Willow. Her anger was pushing back the pain in her side. The joy she’d felt at seeing her sister was swallowed by resentment. “You never listen!”

“That’s not fair,” mewed Luna. “I was trying to protect you.”

Willow’s heart hardened. “When will you understand? It’s not your job to look after me—I can look after myself. I’ve looked after myself since the day you turned your back on me at the bridge.”

“I . . . I didn’t. *You* ran away. I tried to find you.”

Willow let out a hollow laugh. “I watched you. I saw you talking to the toad and then heading straight back to the bridge. I saw how *hard* you tried.”

Luna looked confused. “You were there? Why didn’t you say anything?” Her head drooped. “If you’d just swallowed your stupid pride . . .”

Willow’s nape prickled with anger. “It’s called self-respect,” she snarled. “I’m glad you didn’t find me, because I’ve made new friends. I have a new family now.” She looked pointedly at Violet.

“The *Rousseaus*?” hissed Luna. “They’re witches!”

“Violet actually cares for me,” said Willow.

“She was about to stab you!” replied her sister.

“It’s not what it looks like,” protested Violet. “I’d never hurt her.”

Luna turned on Violet again, and she cowered. “Silence, witch! No animal can ever trust a human. Willow *knows* that, no matter how you might have turned her head.”

“We’re going to be *bound*,” said Willow.

“No . . . ,” Luna insisted. “No, you can’t. Don’t be a fool.”

“I can, and I will,” snapped Willow.

“No coven will ever accept you,” said Luna.

“And?” said Willow. “How *is* your life, scraping a living and shivering through the winter? Does Mousebane still tell you you’re a clever kitten? Does he pat you on the paw with a wing when you perform your fire magic?”

Luna looked confused. “I haven’t seen Mousebane for months.” She glanced at Violet. “This girl will keep you as a prisoner. She’ll drain your anima.”

“I won’t!” cried Violet, glaring at Luna. “I’m not like that.”

Willow heard the pounding of footsteps coming from downstairs, and the raven cawed loudly. “We *have* to go, Luna. They’ll kill us!”

Coalclaw turned and flapped away.

Luna stared at her sister. “Please, Willow. Come with me now, before it’s too late.”

Willow saw the desperate plea in her sister’s eyes. Regret and love surged from whisker to tail. They stood less than three tail-lengths apart, but it might as well have been the width of the city itself. The Luna she’d once known was in there somewhere, but too much had changed. They’d *both*

changed, twisted with anger and recrimination, envy and shame. “I can’t,” she said. “I’m staying with Violet. That’s what I want.”

Now the footsteps were on the stairs.

Luna finally turned and fled in the same direction as the raven, leaving Willow and Violet alone. Moments later, Mr. and Mrs. Rousseau burst into the room. Violet’s father was cradling something in his hands, and Willow realized it was Itch. The rat was alive, but seeing the blood seeping between Mr. Rousseau’s fingers, Willow guessed he wouldn’t be for long.

“What happened?” asked Violet’s mother, eyes moving from the door, which hung off its hinges, to the smoking cushion, to her own daughter.

“Mom . . . ,” said Violet. Despite everything, she threw herself into her mother’s arms, and Mrs. Rousseau hugged her tightly.

“Willow’s sister is a Renegade,” croaked Itch. “They came to try to rescue her. Willow is probably a Renegade too, for all we know.”

Mr. Rousseau’s cold gaze fell on Willow. “You’re burned,” he said.

“It would have been me, but she saved me,” said Violet.

Her mother pushed her to arm’s length. “Did you complete the binding?” she asked, looking Violet over from head to toe.

Violet tore free. “No,” she said, eyes blazing with defiance. “You can’t force us.”

“It’s impossible now,” said the cloaked man, in the doorway. “The anima is too disturbed. The circle is broken.” He raised a bony hand toward the wax circle, which was indeed ruined by Luna’s flames, melted and smeared.

A growl escaped Mr. Rousseau’s throat. “Maybe it’s for the best anyway,” he said. “We need to ascertain exactly who this cat is before we let our daughter be bound to it. But first, we’ll deal with these Renegades. We’ll hunt down every last one of them. They attacked Violet with fire. She could have been seriously hurt.”

“Their lair is hidden to humans,” said Willow, finding her voice. “You’ll never find them.”

In Mr. Rousseau’s hands, Itch let out a cackle, which turned into a suffocating cough.

“I’m afraid we already have,” he squeaked. “Or rather, *you* told us how.”

Willow felt a cold dread steal across her fur. “I wouldn’t do that. . . .”

“Oh, you didn’t have a choice,” said Itch. He managed to wriggle his claws. “I’ve been in your dreams, little cat, and I’ve seen all we need. . . .”

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Chapter 17

Coalclaw seemed to understand that Luna wasn't ready to talk, and she flew in short and silent sorties overhead as she trudged below, back across the city, to the bridge, and then onward toward the industrial district. She ached from head to tail, and even the fresh anima that rose from the river failed to revive her body or her spirit.

In her head, she kept replaying the scene in the derelict house. The terror of seeing the girl with the knife, the moment Willow leaped up to meet the fireball. *I could've killed her. I nearly did.*

What had Willow been thinking? How brainwashed must she have been to risk her life for a witch?

And what could I have done or said differently? What could I have said to convince her to come with me?

Maybe the answer was nothing. Maybe they really should be apart, and it was time to accept that.

Under her paws, she felt the vibration of an approaching vehicle and leaped out of the way as it swished past. She hadn't been paying attention, and besides, there were hardly ever cars in this part of the city.

"Oh no . . . ," said Coalclaw. Luna looked up to see her perched on a brick wall, staring after the car. Then she saw it too. It wasn't just any vehicle. Polished to a high black shine, it seemed to glide along the road.

The Rousseaus . . .

But they weren't coming from the city. They were coming from the direction of the junkyard. Coalclaw shot off ahead, and despite her weariness, Luna sprinted after her. She reached the junkyard to find the

raven standing on the hood of the blue car, her wings sagging. The magical entranceway was already open.

"We're too late," she cawed. "Don't look, Luna."

But she had to, and she pushed her legs to work, carrying her between the stacks of wreckage toward the center of the lair.

The first body she came across was Acorn, the fox they'd rescued a few nights before from Saxton's prison. She lay on her side, one bloodshot eye still open. It wasn't clear what had killed her. Luna recognized a couple of the other older dogs, loyal lieutenants to Nightshade. Their corpses lay side by side. A raccoon named Stripe was a sad heap of fur, but as she walked closer, she saw he lay over the top of a kitten. Maybe Stripe had died trying to protect it. The kitten had been called Moonshine, she remembered.

Luna's throat felt choked with grief.

And then she saw Nightshade. He lay draped across the saddle of his motorbike, panting rapidly. She rushed toward him, and only realized when she was close, from the unnatural shape of his body, that his back was broken. His eyes watched her approach. "Luna . . . you're alive. . . ."

"Don't speak," she said. "We'll get you help. Some healing magic . . ."

He groaned. "No magic can fix me, Luna," he said. "I'm done for."

She reached up with her paws onto the bike's chassis and pressed her head to his. "I'm so sorry," she said. "You let me in when I had nowhere to go. You taught me and helped me. I never wanted it to lead to this."

His body shuddered and his tongue lolled. "Luna, take care of the Renegades," he said. "Your magic is powerful enough to help protect them. And . . ." He said something else that she couldn't hear. She put her ear to his mouth as it moved. "And take . . . revenge," he managed, before she felt his breath stop on her cheek.

She backed off, and saw his eyes were already lifeless and unseeing.

Slowly, from the piles of debris, a few creatures emerged from hiding. Snowflake and Kite were first, followed by the golden-furred puppy and some of the others from Saxton's den. Coalclaw landed in the center of the clearing. They all approached slowly, forming a loose circle around their dead leader and the bike on which he'd sat proudly so many times, bathing in their respect and admiration.

A short while later, the surviving Renegades stood silent beside the riverbank where they'd brought the bodies of their comrades. Nightshade was the last they gave to the water, and Luna watched his black shape drift gently on the current. According to the stories told by others, he'd been a formidable warrior, and hundreds of bound creatures across the covens owed him their freedom. "He fought to the very end," muttered Kite, "but the humans were too strong."

She'd only heard smatterings from the survivors about what happened at the junkyard, and she had no wish to make them relive it. It seemed the Rousseaus had powerful and terrible magic. Coalclaw said they hadn't physically touched any of their victims, but Mr. Rousseau seemed able to stop an animal's breath just by pointing in their direction. As for his wife, her powers sounded even more terrifying. She had somehow set members of the coven against one another, making them unable to fight a murderous urge to attack their fellow Renegades.

And my poor sister is trapped with these monsters. Can't she see what they are? Doesn't she care?

It was too awful to think about. Luna stared across the water to the vanishing dot of Nightshade's floating body. She let her head drop and thought of the Truthtellers and their strange animal gods.

Is Nightshade going to be with them now? she wondered. It was a comforting idea, that there might be a place for the dead where their lives and deeds were celebrated, but she wasn't sure she really believed it. It was hard to imagine peace could follow such terrible violence.

"What now?" asked Coalclaw mournfully. "We can't return to the junkyard. The Rousseaus could come back at any time."

"I'm sorry," Luna told her. "It's my fault the Rousseaus came after us."

Coalclaw shook her head. "We all knew that witches would kill us if they could. By freeing their captives, we take their power. They'd do anything to stop us. It's the risk we face."

"We'll need to find a new home," said Luna. "Somewhere safe."

"So we're running away?" muttered Snowflake. "Might as well call ourselves the Fugitives instead of the Renegades."

"We regroup, and then we fight," said Coalclaw. "That's what Nightshade wanted. We have to avenge him."

"Against *all* witches," said Kite. "We need to take their magic and make sure nothing like this can ever happen again. That's the Renegade spirit!"

His rousing words brought a few half-hearted cheers from the others. But even though Luna knew he was right, she'd sensed the looks the other survivors were shooting her way.

They blame me, no matter what Coalclaw says, and so they should. Nightshade warned me what the Rousseaus were capable of, and look where it's ended.

"I know a place we can stay tonight," said Snowflake.

The mood remained somber as they proceeded along the riverbank. Luna guessed that each of them was reliving their part in the day's tragic events or remembering fonder times at the junkyard. Or maybe they were looking for someone to blame, someone other than Luna herself.

She was thinking of Willow.

Just a few hours before, she'd dreamed of nothing more than getting her sister back—a happy reconciliation and their past arguments buried. It seemed so naïve now. Under the sadness of the day, she felt her heart harden.

Perhaps she had been an overbearing sister, but she was also sure she was the sister who'd tried the hardest to make amends. She had joined the Renegades to save Willow. And what had Willow been doing all that time? Living a life of luxury with a powerful family of bloodthirsty murderers. No doubt telling them everything she knew about the covens on the other side of the river.

From the moment when Luna had seen the Rousseaus' car leaving the junkyard, a queasy feeling had been building in her stomach. She had held it at bay, focusing on dealing with the dead, but now she let it swell like a rotten fruit. For who else could have told the Rousseaus how to access the Renegade lair but her sister? And why wouldn't she, if she were bound to their daughter?

Luna thought back to their confrontation in the witch's house. *I can look after myself.* Those were her sister's words. Was this what she had meant—sacrificing the lives of the Renegades to keep the Rousseaus happy? To keep herself safe and looked after?

Luna could forgive her sister almost anything. They'd both made plenty of mistakes and said some terrible things to each other.

But to betray the coven, to do so willingly to their enemy, knowing what carnage would result . . . Well, that made Willow an accessory to their murders.

It made her a killer.

And that was unforgivable.

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Chapter 18

Willow's wounds still stung if she made sudden movements, but the ointment Violet had applied back at the apartment had worked wonders. Maybe the fur would even grow back in time. She'd spent most of the day in a restless slumber, woken by flashes of memory, and of pain.

Now, as evening approached, they were in the car again, Willow in Violet's lap, with Mr. and Mrs. Rousseau opposite. They hadn't told Violet where they were going, but they seemed more relaxed than earlier, so Willow doubted they'd be subjected to another binding ritual. In fact, Violet's parents hadn't mentioned the disaster at the binding house at all. They had spent the morning running errands, then taken Violet out for lunch, over which the conversation, Violet reported, had mostly been about a vacation they planned to take. Considering that Fidget, Mrs. Rousseau's rat, had been killed less than twelve hours before, and Itch had only just pulled through, they seemed in remarkably high spirits.

Willow found it unnerving. Itch had fallen into unconsciousness before explaining what he'd meant about her dreams, but she remembered Ragwort telling her about the windshield, and the sense she'd had that Itch had been scratching her in her sleep. Violet had told her that even she didn't fully understand Itch's powers, but she thought they had something to do with mind reading. Could the rat really have learned how to get into the Renegades' secret hideout from Willow's dreams, or was he just tormenting her in his sinister way?

The car slowed by a curbside in a shabby neighborhood, and Mrs. Rousseau smiled. "We're here again!" she said.

Violet looked out of the window and scrunched up her face. “I don’t want to come in this time,” she said.

“Nonsense!” said her mother brightly. “Mr. Saxton tells us he has some new stock.”

“I’ve made my choice,” said Violet, pulling Willow closer to her.

“You’re being too emotional,” said her mother. “At least look at the other options. And besides,” she continued more brightly, “you can help your father choose his replacement for Fidget.”

“I’d rather not,” she said.

Her father leaned forward and fixed her with a glare. “If you think, for one second, that we’d leave you out here with that stray, you’re more foolish than I thought. She might not have hurt you, but you could have been hurt because of her. You’re coming in. End of story.”

“I think Saxton’s cruel,” she said. “They say he hunts attuned animals and takes them against their will.”

“He’s a businessman,” said her mother, patting her knee. “And animals don’t know what they want half the time. They’re safer and better cared for as beloved familiars instead of as strays on the street. Look at how much healthier that cat of yours is than when you found her.”

“Some of them want to be free,” said Violet.

“Like the Renegades?” said her father, smiling. “They found out the cost of that freedom earlier today, I’ll tell you.”

Willow glanced at Violet, whose brow creased.

“What happened? Did you do something?” asked their daughter.

But her father was already climbing out of the car, followed by Mrs. Rousseau, who waited by the open door. “Now, come on. And don’t be rude to Mr. Saxton.”

Willow’s mind was on her sister as they headed into a brightly lit reception area lined on one side with a huge mirror. If Luna was with the Renegades, she might be in danger. She wanted to ask the Rousseaus directly what had happened, but they seemed to enjoy dropping hints and she doubted she’d get a straight answer. As yet, she hadn’t worked out why they were still keeping her around. After all, the day before they’d been quite open about their plans should Violet refuse to accept the binding. She expected at any moment to be cast out, back onto the freezing city streets.

Willow forgot her worries for a moment as a man with a ponytail came out to greet them. He spread his arms wide, and Willow noted his thick

fingers adorned with several chunky golden rings. “Ah, my favorite customers!” he said.

“You say that to everyone,” said Mr. Rousseau.

“And my condolences,” said Jay Saxton with a small bow of his head. “I heard about dear Gadget.”

“Fidget,” said Mrs. Rousseau, somewhat coldly.

“Indeed, indeed,” said Saxton. “But you’ll be in the market for a new familiar. Maybe something more *substantial* this time? I have a beautiful litter of bobcats.”

“Small is fine,” said Violet’s mother. “I like to be discreet.”

“Well, I’m sure I have just the thing,” said Saxton. “Perhaps a bat? Or a reptile, if you prefer something cold-blooded?”

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” said Mr. Rousseau. “We need something compatible with my Itch. He’s got rather an odd sense of humor.”

“Rats often do,” said Saxton. “Have you considered a lizard like my Lemon?” From his breast pocket, a small yellow head emerged, before vanishing again. “Come this way, please.”

Mrs. Rousseau gestured to Violet. “Come along, dear.”

Violet crossed her arms and stayed put. “I told you. I don’t want any of his animals.”

Her father frowned. “You’ll do as your mother tells you, Violet.” But Saxton waved a hand. “No need to pressure the young lady. Another time, perhaps, when she’s in a better mood. Wouldn’t want her to make a rash decision, would we?”

Mr. Rousseau took a deep breath. “Very well. She can wait here, but do lock the door. In her present mood, I’m worried she might wander off.”

Saxton took a keychain from his belt and walked across to the front door of the building. As he did, Willow felt his eyes linger on her for slightly too long. “This one’s been in the wars, I see,” he said.

“Accident-prone,” said Mrs. Rousseau, “but we’re hoping she heals up well.”

Saxton continued to look her up and down as he locked the door from the inside, and Willow treated him to a withering stare in return.

As soon as they’d gone through another door, Violet muttered, “I told you he was a creep.”

“What do you think your father meant, about the Renegades paying the price?” asked Willow.

“I don’t know,” replied Violet. “They’ve been weird all day. No talk of any punishment. No consequences for last night. I feel like they’re planning something.”

“Well, I’m going to find out,” said Willow. She quickly turned herself invisible.

“Be careful!” whispered Violet. She stroked Willow’s back, looking worried. “No risks.”

Willow left the girl and slipped through the same door as Violet’s parents. On the other side, she found herself in a pristine room lined with dozens of cages, full of animals of every sort. She saw dogs, cats, a snake, and even a couple of brightly colored birds. There was a tank holding a strange tentacled creature bobbing in water. A small furry animal with a black-and-white-ringed tail and huge green eyes stared out sadly from a container.

The Rousseaus seemed uninterested in any of them. The three adults stood in a huddle at the far end, speaking in low voices. Willow crept closer as Saxton was speaking.

“From what I’ve seen, Mr. Rousseau, you weren’t lying. Powerfully, powerfully attuned. Okay, a little to be desired physically, with the burns, et cetera, but that’s all cosmetic and won’t trouble any of my more discerning clients in the slightest.”

They’re talking about me!

“And you’re quite right—much too ambitious for your Violet,” continued the dealer. “She needs something more manageable. Something more *disposable*, I daresay, to start her off. If we can do the deal for the cat today, I’ll happily throw in any rabbit of her choosing. Young girls love a rabbit, in my experience.”

“Whatever,” said Mrs. Rousseau. “We’ll just be happy when she starts developing her powers. Other kids her age are already quite accomplished, but then they get their first familiars at nine or ten.”

Furious and afraid, Willow began to retreat from the room.

“Even younger, in my experience,” Saxton replied. “In fact, I supplied a bald eagle to a five-year-old last month. They were almost the same size!”

Willow ran back to Violet’s side, throwing off her spell. “They’re going to bind you to a new familiar,” she mewed, “and they’re planning to sell *me* to Saxton.”

“No, they can’t!” said Violet, picking Willow up and hugging her to her chest. “I won’t let them.”

“I think it’s too late,” said Willow. Despair washed over her at the thought of losing her best friend, being put in one of the cages. . . .

And she knew then that Violet was feeling exactly the same panic and terror as she was, and that the human girl would do anything to protect her, just as Willow had thrown herself in the path of Luna’s fireball the night before.

Anima rose up around them, warm as a blanket, but tighter and tighter, until it seemed to be pressing them together, fusing their limbs. As Violet clutched her, Willow could feel the girl’s heartbeat, a rapid patter. Or was it her own?

Or could it . . . somehow . . . be both?

“Do you feel that?” whispered Violet.

Willow was afraid, but only for a moment, because in the next she experienced a rush of comfort like nothing she’d ever felt before. Or perhaps that wasn’t true, because it reminded her of *something* from the distant past, not memory exactly, nor nostalgia, but a sort of bone-deep contentment she’d enjoyed when with her mother—without a care, a present happiness and the promise of the same for the future. It suffused her entire being and she knew it had enveloped Violet too.

“Are we . . . ?” she gasped.

“I think so,” replied Violet.

Neither of them had to say the word, because they knew exactly what had occurred. Violet had even said, hadn’t she, that it could happen in many ways?

So much for blood rituals, and wax circles, and men with black robes. . . .

The door opened and from it emerged Saxton and the Rousseaus. Panic shot through Willow’s fur.

“Where are they?” said Violet’s father, his eyes widening.

“You said you locked the door!” cried his wife.

“I did!” said Saxton. “You watched me do it.”

It took Willow a moment to understand. Somehow, they were *both* invisible. Not just hidden in the shadows with the aid of magic, like how she had hidden Ragwort, or when she and Violet had snuck around the apartment building at night. Her magic had worked without her even having to think it, concealing them from danger even in the bright light of day. Violet was grinning at her in disbelief.

Saxton unfastened the lock and flung open the door onto the street. Mr. and Mrs. Rousseau went out too, looking up and down. “I don’t understand,” said Saxton. “Unless your daughter can pass through solid objects, it’s impossible.”

Violet carried Willow out behind them, and began to walk quickly along the sidewalk, past the car, putting more and more distance between herself and her parents.

“Where are we going?” purred Willow.

“I have no idea,” said Violet. “But it doesn’t really matter, does it? The point is that we’re together.”

In a small park, Violet sank onto an old metal bench. Willow, sitting beside her, let the invisibility fall away.

“That was amazing!” Violet said. “How did you do it?”

“I don’t know that I did,” purred Willow. “I think it was *us*.”

Above them, the first stars of a clear night were twinkling. It should have felt cold, but Willow was still filled with the warmth of the anima. It clung to her like a blanket.

Apart from the two of them, the only creatures were a few mundane pigeons, cooing from their roosts in the trees. Willow couldn’t help but remember how she and her sister had once hunted them together, back when pigeon had seemed like a delicacy.

Despite the euphoria of their escape, and the thrill of their binding, Willow felt a strange moment of sadness. Once it had been her and Luna against the world. *Together*, they’d promised. *Always.*

Now she didn’t even know if her sister was alive. She had thought Luna would never leave her side, and now she had hurt Willow more than any other living creature—not just her burns, but far more deeply too.

She nuzzled into Violet. Her friend. Her witch. Her bound companion.

It could never be Willow and Luna again.

Now it’s just the two of us, she thought. *Now it’s Willow and Violet.*

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Epilogue

The water was as clear as any she had seen, and Endurance stared right down to the pale blue tiles on the bottom of the swimming pool. She wasn't sure what had drawn her to this place. She shuffled along the length of the diving board until she'd reached the very end.

She sensed in the vast hall the lingering laughter of children and the splashing of their play, but in the nighttime hours it was silent and peaceful. She only wished her own heart could be as still. She had hoped the business with the sister cats might have found its resolution that night under the bridge, but she feared now it had only just begun.

News had reached the Conclave just that day that the Renegades were broken, their leader viciously killed. Could she and the other toads have prevented it? She didn't know.

Somehow, despite the chemicals that burned her nostrils, the anima flowed strongly around the pool. Maybe this place had once been sacred to the animal spirits, before the humans built a school. Endurance had learned not to question such things, but to accept the gifts the anima gave. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, edging her weight over the lip of the board. For a moment, she was suspended, cushioned by the anima, but she let gravity take her and down she plummeted.

She entered the water headfirst with a plop, and sank deeper, her legs splayed in total relaxation until she was floating in dark equilibrium.

Then the visions came.

Two giant human figures, looming so high she had to crane her neck, and even then, she couldn't see their faces. At their feet, the corpses of animals

were strewn, and for a moment she feared they might crush her too, as one colossal foot blocked out the light and descended toward her. She clenched her eyes shut, waiting for the terrible weight to grind her into dust.

It never came, and when she dared to look again, she was squatting on a grassy hillside, completely alone at the end of day. A river of anima babbled beside her, and her eyes followed its wending course upstream to where a willow tree grew, hale and hearty, its branches strong. Above it hovered a giant yellow moon, large and luminous, and between them both a boundless, dark blue sky of glittering stars. It was a scene of such perfect balance it took Endurance's breath away.

It did not last. For over the horizon swept a cold wind that tickled the grasses and made her shiver. And with it rose the disc of the sun—a black sun that shot out tendrils of sickly light that turned the grass to dust. Where the dark sun's rays touched the tree, they made the branches wither and die. Endurance watched with despair as the sun rose to blot out the moon and eclipse its yellow glow entirely. She realized she could no longer hear the trickle of the stream at all. The bed was dry as bone. The anima was gone.

She surfaced in the swimming pool and lay on her back, recovering slowly from the horror and trying to rid her mind of the visions.

She knew it would not be easy. The terrible black sun lurked on, like a visual echo, awaiting the moment she dared to close her eyes again.

Endurance knew she would get no sleep tonight. . . .

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About the Author

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. She is the bestselling author of the Warriors, Seekers, Survivors, Bravelands, and Bamboo Kingdom series. Erin lives in the UK.

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